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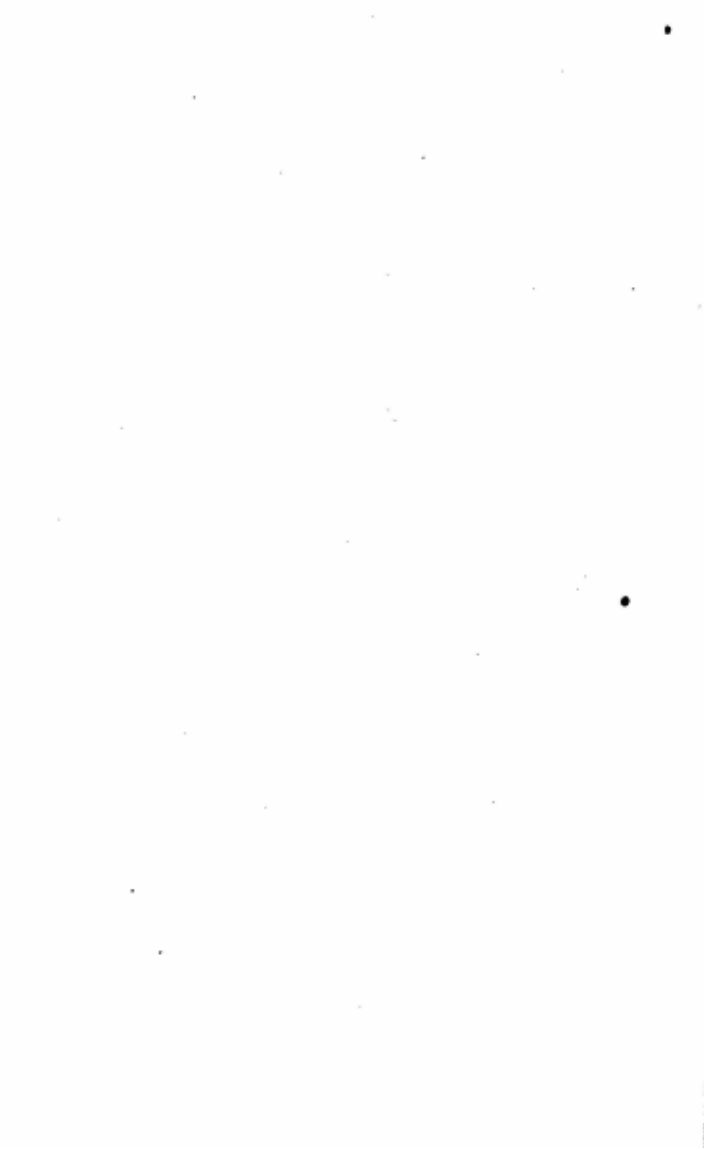
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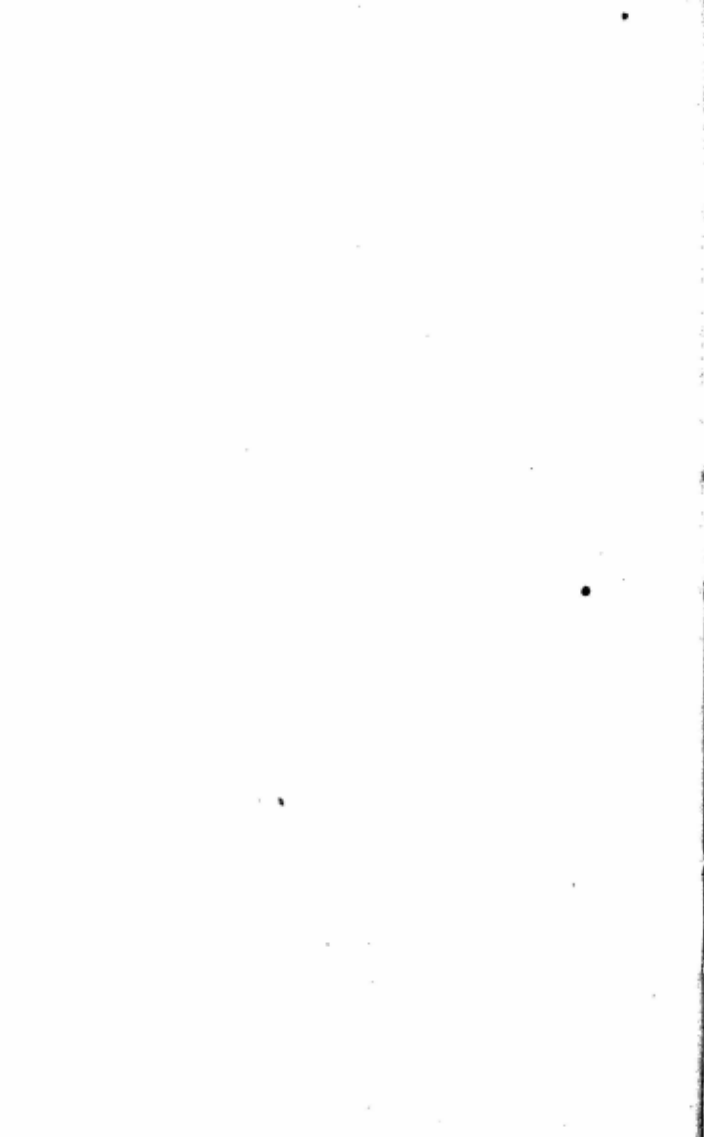
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**COMPLIMENTS**



The Far People  
A Norwegian Journal



# The Far People

*A Norwegian Journal*

**NARENDRA TANEJA**

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**MEDIA PEOPLE INT.**

New Delhi

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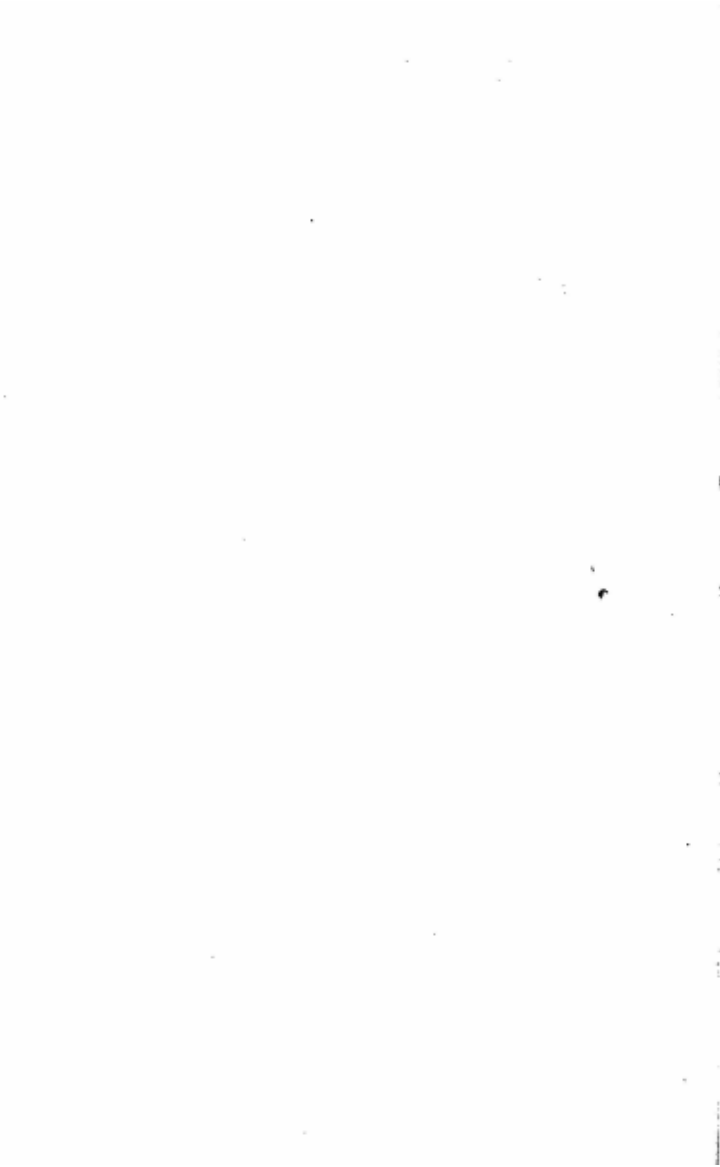
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• *To Rasham, Kabir Erik and Annika*





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## Preface

This volume has been in the making for quite some time now. The story begins in April, 1987 in Oslo when I made my first serious effort to keep the journal. I have since returned to Norway several times and the journal travelled with me—invariably. THE FAR PEOPLE is thus my journal kept over several visits. However, when I sat down to give it the shape of a book I decided to strike off the dates for the sake of form and continuity. A date and year-wise version could be confusing, especially to those not familiar with Norway. I have left the designations and the events as they were when I recorded them. For instance, King Olav is long dead. But the Oslo function where I witnessed the Norwegians showering love on him has been kept as it is, without mentioning his death anywhere.

THE FAR PEOPLE is not an attempt to record events or anything in chronological order. When I first began to write the journal I was not even sure that I would publish it. But along the way I made up my mind to offer it for publication. Some friends who saw it also persuaded me to publish it, and fast.

Some Norwegians may see a few issues raised here by some of their compatriots as unacceptable or controversial. But I have only recorded things as said to me, in all honesty. I have made no attempt whatsoever to sensationalise, inflame, or suppress anything told to me.

I am indebted to my friend Halle Jørn Hanssen for persuading and supporting me to come up with this journal. I am grateful to Åslaug Marie Haga, Morten Møst and Arthur Monteiro for reading the manuscript and useful help and to Alf Arne Råmslien and N S Aravamudhan for their assistance and encouragement.

New Delhi  
October, 1992

Narendra Taneja





79829

## OSLO

Oslo's Fornebu airport shimmered in the silky sunshine of spring as our Lufthansa flight touched ground. A gaggle of white Arctic birds were joyously celebrating along the tarmac the end of the Norwegian winter.

The aerial view of Oslo had been breath-taking. But the scene that greeted us on emerging from the plane was even more spectacular. Small, colourful villas built of wood, tucked away in the scattered mountains, presented a fairytale view. It was like an ultimate landscape of nature by the ultimate artist—Nature itself. How gorgeously Nature had endowed Norway!

The passage to the immigration counter was through a long underground corridor. The policeman behind the high counter, smartly uniformed, looked dour. The queue moved fast. Scandinavians, who accounted for most of the arrivals, just waved their passport in the air before being let in.

But I was stopped.

He scrutinised my passport, from cover to cover. Apparently satisfied that I was not trying to smuggle myself in, he said: 'Fine! Please go there and fill up this form first.' He handed me a form and gestured me to a lonely bench in a corner of the arrival hall.

I said: 'I can fill it up standing right here. Why go there and then queue up again?'

'Oh, you are in a hurry', he said.

'Not at all. It is only to protest. Why don't you arrange

to distribute this disembarkation form on the flight itself as many countries do?"

I quickly filled up the form while he waved in a score or so others.

When he was waving me in, I asked: "So only Third World visitors are supposed to answer this landing card?"

He said: "Not really. But we have instructions to carefully examine passports of people coming from countries like yours." His manner was aloof, businesslike.

I told him I was not surprised, but added: "I only hoped Norway was different."

He looked at me blankly.

I collected my luggage and changed some money at Bank Kreditkassen's airport counter.

The drive by taxi to a downtown hotel was refreshing. Oslo was soaking in the sunshine, but the air was quite cold and wet. Jon, my taxi driver, said it was a typical Norwegian early spring day.

The hotel room overlooked a view of Karl Johans Gate, the queen of Oslo's streets, the imposing building of Storting (Parliament), and a few other landmarks.

After a long, hot bath I opted for a delicious French dinner and retired for the day. It had been a long, weary 18 hours journey from New Delhi. I slept for 10 hours.

When I woke up, it was raining. The dense clouds and the blowing rain reminded me of the Delhi I had left behind. As an Indian, I had been conditioned to think of the monsoon as a season that triggered the heart to go out and hunt for song and romance.

I said so to a girl I met in the hotel lobby. "Are you crazy?" she almost shouted. "It is bad, very bad weather. It should have been the Sun, a lot of warm Sun to send Norwegian hearts crying for love and romance. How can you think of song and love in such lousy weather?"

I told her that it is exactly the other way round in India.

Our summers are so long and searing that we pine for a heavy downpour to lighten our hearts. She thought I was joking.

Back in my room, I began to list the people I had to call on. It was a long list: Andreas Norland, Reiulf Steen, Egil Sundar, Carl I. Hagen, Halle Jørn Hanssen, Svanhild Ruud, Ragnvald Nærø, Gro Harlem Brundtland, Morten Møst, Theo Koritzinsky, Stig Fossum, Kjetil Flatin and others. Then I began phoning them to seek appointments.

Kjetil invited me to come right away. Theo Koritzinsky and I agreed to meet over lunch at the Storting later in the week. Brundtland's secretary said she was away to London to present a report on environment. 'What else!' I said to myself. Brundtland will go to the ends of the earth to speak about environment. Svanhild was in the United States. Andreas Norland was due back that week from a trip abroad. I would be able to meet all of them before I left Norway for home.

Kjetil Flatin is a very warm human being. If I were asked to name a person who best personified Norwegian generosity, kindness and broadness of mind, I would name Kjetil without a second thought. A Ph.D. from the United States, he has done a fantastic deal to promote the Norwegian contribution to international education. He knows a lot about Asia and Africa though he has not been to any Third World country. He was planning to visit Africa soon. He had a fruitful stint as the director of Oslo's International Summer School. He now runs Studentsamskipnaden—a nationwide student welfare establishment—from his picturesque third floor office in Blindern.

Blindern, which mainly houses the Oslo University's numerous buildings, is a splendid part of the city. We walked down to a nearby university cafeteria, and later sauntered around the campus. The campus is modest in



size, but it is one of the best equipped and modern universities in Scandinavia.

It was still raining. 'Oh, don't think too much about the weather in Norway. Otherwise, you'll end up talking about weather only', Kjetil said. 'We Norwegians never get tired of discussing the weather.'

'I am not surprised. Your weather looks pretty naughty to me', I said. 'The weather in India is so predictable most of the year that it is boring. Summer means week after week of burning Sun and more Sun. It is almost unchangeable.'

Next minute, Kjetil pushed open the door of a small office, saying: 'I know your interests. So let me introduce you to Bent.'

'Yes, please. I am curious', I said.

It was the office of the *Universitas*, a students' own fortnightly. Bent Sofus Tranoy is an impressive young man, a radical and a conservative rolled into one, if that is possible. 'I'm the elected editor of the paper', he said.

The small, two-room office of the *Universitas* in the heart of the university campus presented an untidy appearance, with newspapers, books and files scattered all over. 'Like our own newspaper offices', I thought. I discovered later that most Norwegian newspaper offices are very organised, spruce and shiny affairs, unlike their counterparts in Asia and South Europe.

'You said you are an elected editor', I prodded Bent.

'That's right. I was elected by the students' parliament which also finances the newspaper', he explained.

'But where do they get their money from?'

'From the students. Each student has to pay a certain fee to the parliament every year and they get the newspaper free.'

'Do students really read your paper?' I asked. 'Anything distributed free is hardly read.'

'I hope they do', he said. Since he had taken over, he said, the circulation had shot up phenomenally.

Bent intended to take up journalism as his profession. But there was not a single newspaper in Norway he was enthusiastic about. 'They all look so boring to me', he remarked.

I wished Bent best of luck and left for Holmenveien, to meet the Indian Ambassador to Norway, R.K. Anand, who had invited me for an Indian meal. Anand is rated as one of the best ambassadors India has ever sent to Norway. Relations between the two countries have touched several new heights during his tenure in Oslo. 'It is a wonderful country to be accredited to. The people are so nice, so friendly out here', he observed. He has a German-born wife, whom he met in Paris during his posting there years ago.

NORAD, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, is a government directorate which looks after development assistance to countries of the Third World. It has done an incredibly good job in several developing countries, including India. Halle Jørn Hanssen had invited me to a function to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the agency. The venue was the city's prestigious Konserthuset, the Concert House. It was a gorgeous hall, very modern. There must have been around 1,500 invitees, including many top political leaders and ambassadors.

The function was due to start at seven in the evening. Everyone was in his seat by 6.50. Punctually at seven, a protocol official opened the main entrance to the hall. As if on cue, the entire hall rose to its feet in solemn silence. King Olav entered, escorted by four officials. The eighty year old, tall King is almost a folk hero in his country, beloved of most of his countrymen. Norwegians fondly remember the sacrifices he made during Adolf Hitler's occupation of his kingdom. To me it was a revelation that even in this age of satellites and spacecraft a king could be so much loved by his subjects. It was not a scene from

a tribal region in Africa or the Americas but in a fiercely democratic country of Europe.

The hall waited on its feet while the King ambled up to his seat. The only sound that broke the pin-drop silence was the sound of his shoes. He walked up to a seat in the seventh row and sat. I could not believe my eyes. A King occupying a back seat! The man in the row before him could have been anyone, an ordinary worker or a sweeper. Coming from New Delhi, this was culture shock to me. I had been used to seeing roads blocked even at peak traffic hours so that the motorcade of the Prime Minister, an elected representative of the people, could pass in resplendent majesty.

The function turned out to be an experience of sorts. When Arja Saijonma of Finland sang, the entire assemblage seemed electrified. Her voice was intoxicating and she looked terrific. She lives in Sweden and is well known in Scandinavia.

Botswana's Foreign Minister, G.K.T. Chiepe was the guest speaker. His encomiums of NORAD for its contribution to his country's development were so profuse that the Norwegian officials present there felt embarrassed.

More embarrassing still was the American black singer Ruth Reese. Her song, 'If you want help, come to NORAD' made someone like me from the Third World want to hang my head in shame. She seemed to have no idea whatever of NORAD's activities or aims. Apparently, she had concluded that NORAD was some kind of Santa Claus. Her naivete almost spoiled the mood of many present there. But was she alone responsible for the blunder? I did not think so.

The function over, we all headed for the City Hall. It is a massive structure, built like a goat cheese cake. Oslo's mayor Albert Nordengen was giving a party to celebrate NORAD's birthday. Champagne flowed.

Later in the evening I called Halle Jørn Hannsen to thank him for inviting me to the function. He was inten-

sely sad about the starvation death of 67 children in Africa that television had just reported. Halle had served in that continent for years, including a stint as the Africa correspondent of NRK, the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation.

Halle has lost his heart to the Third World. He probably has more friends in the developing world than in Norway. He was in New Delhi for a year recently accompanying Marit Berggrav, his wife who served as a senior official at NORAD's office in India. Their parties were always warm, informal and heavily attended. Halle is certainly ambassadorial material. He did a terrific job of strengthening Norway-India relations during his stay in India.

May Day is carnival time in Norway. A huge crowd had gathered on Karl Johans Gata on the last day of April. People, mostly young, were cheering, eating and drinking. Now and then, an empty beer bottle was thrown against the wall to raise a bang. A group of young workers was shouting for the sheer heck of it. The police were present in strength. 'What exactly is going on here?' I asked a policeman.

'Nothing', he grinned. 'They are just having fun. Don't you know it is labour day tomorrow!' He seemed surprised at my query.

I explained that I was a visitor from India.

He then enlightened me on the whole thing. Norway's recent history, he said, was to a great extent nothing but the history of the labour movement and its achievements. Norwegians owed a lot to the labour movement started decades ago. The Labour Party had ruled Norway for most part since the 1940s and the nation owed its remarkable achievements to that fact. Norwegians, he said, were better known the world over for the just society that the Labour Party had succeeded in creating in that country.

A recent trend, however, was to seek a change from the

present. Many Norwegians now wanted full-fledged capitalism.

The kind of celebrations I was seeing were a rather recent phenomenon, he said, hardly 10 or 15 years old. But the people seemed to enjoy it a lot. Norwegian Television, NRK, was putting out several interesting programmes that night to keep the people indoors. 'But, as you see here', he concluded, 'this is much more attractive than television.' It was obvious that Norwegians love to hit the road for fun, if the occasion is right.

On May Day, thousands streamed on Oslo's streets. Many carried banners, among which 'Pro-PLO' and 'Nelson Mandela' were the most colourfully written. Some pushed infants in prams, some carried their offspring on their shoulders. Music—perhaps labour music—blared from a couple of mini-trucks. A young girl approached me to sell a copy of *Klassekampen*, a left-wing local daily.

It was a national holiday. Everything was closed, even kiosks.

Ingrid works on a luxury boat sailing between Norway and the U.K. I had met her in New Delhi. Quite a charming girl.

We had agreed to meet at a point beyond the Storting on Karl Johans Gate. The icy winds blowing from the Arctic cut to the bones.

She proposed lunch at Mama Rosa, her favourite Italian restaurant. Mama Rosa has an elegant interior, and a distinctive character. It felt a little cramped, but overall nice.

Ingrid demanded to know what I was doing in Norway. I answered that I planned to travel around, keep a journal and try to publish it.

She said, 'You mean, you plan to write a book on Norway.'

'Sort of. I'll try', I said.

'Then you must write about our shipping industry. It used to be on top, but now it is close to zero', she said, distressfully. 'All that is due to dirty shipping politics here.'

'But I believe you are doing much better now. Mid-1980s was a bad time for shipping the world over', I said.

By then, her boy friend John had joined us. He said, 'True, Norway has improved. But still, Norway has lost the stature it earlier had in world shipping.'

'John, listen', Ingrid insisted, 'There is too much shipping politics here. And they will never let this country reclaim its old glory.'

Was she unhappy with the government policies towards shipping industry, like heavy taxes etc.? Or did she mean that there was too much groupism in Norwegian shipping industry? I tried to find out but failed. She was so emotional, so locked up in the whole thing.

John is an American, a diver by profession. Ingrid was unhappy as Norwegian companies would not hire him.

'Do you know why, Narendra?' she asked. 'It is because the insurance fee for Americans is very high. Isn't it ridiculous?'

John impressed me. He is young and intelligent, and loved her a lot. John said he had been promised a job by a Norwegian company near Stavanger, the headquarters of the Norwegian oil industry. She was hoping the job would materialise. If it did not, John could lose his licence to dive since he would not have dived for too long a time.

Later Ingrid took me to a magnificent art gallery, not far from the King's palace. But we were not lucky. Within 10 minutes of our reaching there the closing time was announced. We had to leave almost as soon as we had entered.

On our way out, on the steps, I ran into a weird looking youth. He had shaved most of his head except for a thick strip of hair that ran from front, which he had dyed jet black.

I asked Ingrid, 'Who is this man? I have seen several like him in Oslo.'

'Better ask him', she suggested.

I went over to him and said, 'Excuse me, sir. Could I ask you a question, a rather personal one?'

He told me to go ahead. His manner was encouraging.

I ventured, 'Why have you cut your hair in this unusual manner?'

'Because it is me!' he said.

'You could still be you without this funny hair cut.'

'Well, it is to protest against this society. It is to show discontent with it, because this society is unjust and inhuman.'

'But how can you change a society you disagree with just by styling your hair in a certain way?'

'Sure, you have a point there. But people do take notice of us. The point is that someone has to start somewhere, in some way. We are not quite organised. But we do have our own music records and some publications.'

I said, 'You look so scary. You look like a violent people.'

'Oh, no! no!!' he protested. 'We are peace loving people. This society is violent.'

I gave him my visiting card, requesting him to mail me a sample of their publications. He said he certainly would. He never did.

For those who love to walk or bike, Oslo is an ideal city. It has a distinct scenic location and fabulous natural surroundings. Its several parks and forest areas make it a virtual dream city. If I had to choose between Oslo, Amsterdam and Copenhagen, I would plump for Oslo. Copenhagen is a nice city, no doubt, but a little too vast and windy. Amsterdam is wonderful, but the feeling that you are living fathoms below sea level is not comforting. Besides, Amsterdam is too touristic.

Many in Europe describe Oslo as rather provincial. For

that matter, Copenhagen too is provincial—a little bigger, but provincial nevertheless. The reason why people call Oslo provincial may be that Oslo has fewer night clubs and restaurants, skyscrapers and corporate headquarters. But I think this traditional scale of rating cities will soon get outdated. Future generations would certainly prefer to live in cities which have a more humane face, rather than cities that are monstrously big, like London or Tokyo.

Oslo today is comfortably medium size. But will Norwegians be able to keep Oslo that way for long? Can the city grow without changing its basic character? The Oslo City Plaza Hotel tower, a recent addition to the city's landscape, looks like a monstrous stainless steel knife out to slit open the city's chest. Does Oslo really need such tall and ugly structures? If I were a Norwegian I would have formed a movement to stop construction of such tall towers in and around downtown Oslo. Maybe there already is one.

Torgata and Storgata are two leading streets of Oslo. The similarity in their names always confused me. I had to visit the office of the Norwegian State Railways, NSB, on Torgate. I had first landed up on Storgata. The result was that I reached for my appointment ten minutes late.

I apologised to the Director of Information, whom I was meeting for the delay and explained my confusion. He said, 'Oh, it was my mistake. I should have spelt the street name to you when we set up this meeting.'

I wanted his assistance in finalising my travel plans around Norway, to identify the sectors I could do by train. He unrolled an elaborate map of Norway and soon we both were hovering over the map, giving shape to my plan to criss-cross the country using all available means of transport—plane, boat, bus, everything. The idea was to draw up a plan which would take me to all kinds of places, small and big, important and remote, green and bare.

He told me that Norwegian trains were very comfortable.



I said I was looking forward to discover more of them. Trains had always fascinated me, I said, since my childhood home had been only ten metres away from a busy rail track. My father worked for the Indian Railways.

He said, 'Really? I am glad to hear it. I wish you could go all over Norway by train. But it is not easy to build railways here because of the landscape of our country.'

The director told me that there were 'many' trains between Oslo and Stavanger. Having known the Indian Railways, I thought that his 'many' would easily mean anything between 10 to 20 trains. It turned out that there were hardly three trains in a day.

In May, New Delhi swelters in the heat of the summer sun which can go even up to 45 degrees Celsius. Norway at this time of the year was shivering in bone chilling wind and rain. I went out in the rain for a lunch meeting at the Storting with Theo Koritzinsky. The main entrance of Storting was closed. Some digging work by machines was going on. One of the hands suggested that I try the back door.

Theo's soft and warm voice welcomed me right at the back entrance. I asked why the main door was closed. Theo smiled. 'They are constructing a controversial underground parking lot for the Storting', he said.

'Why controversial?'

'Storting could well manage without it. We could use this money for some better projects. Why should the Storting have this privilege when others have to struggle to find a place for parking in this part of the city? I am opposed to the plan', he said.

Theo is an exceptionally warm person, simple, hard working and brilliant. He is an intellectual all over. He was chairman of the left-wing Socialist Left Party (SV) until mid-1980s. Currently he is a prominent member of the Storting and a leading national political figure. I first

met him at a function in New Delhi. I was impressed by his intellect, conviction and clarity of thinking. Ever since, we have been in touch.

Theo took me to the Storting's cafeteria which is open only to members of the Storting and their guests. The place breathed power. There were familiar faces seen in newspapers and on television. Einar Førde with his characteristic strip of grey hair right above his forehead was the easiest to recognise. He reminded me of Indira Gandhi who had a similar grey hairline in her forties, which was the cartoonists' delight for many years.

Theo takes special interest in the housing problem. I asked him if housing was a serious problem in Oslo. He said it was terrible.

'Young people in Oslo can't find a place to live. It is not a healthy sign', he said. 'Fifty per cent of the marriages end up in divorce these days, resulting in an increased demand for apartments. Many young divorcees find it impossible to get a reasonable place to live. Soaring prices are another problem', said Theo. The problem could be solved to a considerable extent if the Government paid sufficient attention to the group cooperative housing movement.

Our meeting was rather short as Theo had to rush for a meeting of the Storting's Foreign Affairs Committee. We agreed to meet again before I left for home.

From Storting to the headquarters of Norsk Telegrambureau (NTB) was a short walk. NTB is Norway's main news agency. Ole Nymøn, its foreign editor said that it was jointly owned by different newspapers of Norway. He was heading the foreign desk temporarily since 'the real man' was on deputation to the Defence Ministry.

Ole began explaining the functioning of NTB and other matters, but soon we began discussing King Olav. Ole said he had once interviewed the King for NTB.

'He is a rare human being. It was a superbly rewarding experience to talk to him', he said.

King Olav is distantly related to the British royal family from his mother's side. His wife died of cancer while he was still the Crown Prince.

Norwegians love him for his greatness and for his sacrifices for his land. They are never tired of telling stories about him—about his role during the Second World War, about how he once boarded a local underground train without a penny on him to pay for the ticket, how he went to a difficult, remote place to dedicate a bridge to the nation. He is truly the common man's King.

Another Norwegian journalist I met later in the evening told me this story:

'King Olav was on a State visit to the United States. The chairman of a leading Texas oil company called on him to give a presentation on the American oil industry. But the King dozed off some time during the presentation. The chairman tactfully went on with his presentation as if the King was listening.

'But an American press photographer jumped at the opportunity and clicked, to capture the scene of the high-profile chairman giving a presentation to a sleeping King. The next moment, all Norwegian journalists accompanying the King were pleading with him to kill the picture. "It will be no scandal in Norway", they said. "You'll only hurt him personally." But he would not budge. He did not realise that no Norwegian paper would carry such a picture. Finally, however, he gave in. His Norwegian colleagues took the film and exposed it right away.

'All Norwegian journalists later received a letter of thanks from the King's secretary.'

Norwegians have, in fact, a soft corner for the entire royal family. Crown Prince Harald, whom I met twice during his last visit to New Delhi, is also popular. He appeared to me a very warm person. However, the one who charmed everybody during their stay in India was Crown

Princess Sonja. Daughter of a leading business family, she was a commoner before she married Harald. The affair between the two had flourished for years before the Norwegians knew about it. When it came to be known, it became the talk of the nation since Sonja did not belong to any royal family. The matter soon came up for discussion in the Cabinet and the Storting, as probably is the tradition and constitutional requirement. The unanimous decision was: 'Leave it to King Olav. It is his personal matter.' That was yet another example of Norwegians' love for King Olav. The King not only allowed them to marry but declared his daughter-in-law Crown Princess.

The man looked fiftyish. He looked weary, but he smiled and asked me what country I came from.

'India', I said.

'It is so far away.'

'Well, yes.'

A building technician, he was working as a carpenter in the left wing of the hotel where I was staying, on some renovation work. I had always found him at work, any time of day or night. He would be working when I left in the morning and still busy, cheerful and smiling even when I returned late in the night.

'How much do you make every month?' I asked him.

'30,000 Norwegian Kroners.'

'Thirty thousand! You mean three zero thousand?' I wanted to double check.

'Yes, yes! But I work 16 hours a day. No holiday, no Sunday, nothing. Hardly any hot food either. I work, work, work.'

He was a Dane, and had spent several years working 'as a building technician in a remote corner of Greenland' (as if the whole of Greenland was not a remote place). He was a divorcee.

'You work so hard since you've nothing else to do?' I asked.

'No, that is not the story. Since I asked for divorce, I now have to send maintenance money to my former wife.'

I asked, 'You have this system even in Scandinavia? I thought this contingency is covered by the State under the numerous welfare schemes.'

'I've to pay. I know only that.'

'So that's why you've to work all these extra hours.'

'Right! That's why.'

'Greenland has always fascinated me. But how green really is Greenland?' I asked.

'Very, very little.'

He told me about his days in Greenland, how he met his former wife there, about life in the American military bases there, about the weather and the storms, and about the high suicide rate there.

He asked my name and even tried to pronounce it. 'You've a very difficult, tongue twisting name.'

I asked his name.

He asked, jokingly, 'Are you from the Norwegian tax department?'

I protested that I was a journalist. He still hesitated. I asked him the reason.

He said, 'I work long hours here to save money. But to work such long hours is illegal in Norway. That is why. But I'll tell you my name. It is ..... But please do not mention it, or I'll be in trouble.'

# Train to Stavanger

The sun was back again after days of rain and the Arctic chill. Everything looked freshly washed—the buildings, the litter bin by the road, the walls of Oslo's central railway station. It was the same old Nordic sun—bright, shiny and beautiful, but disarmed of heat.

The railway station looked modest and functional. The atmosphere on the platform was rather dull and colourless for an Indian eye. No big crowd of near and dear ones to see off someone. In India, railway platforms present a colourful picture, more like a rural-folk fair, with all its noise and vibrancy. I saw only one boy, hardly 7, sobbing as he bade goodbye to his father. His mother helped him wipe away his tears saying, 'Don't cry, Anders. He'll be back soon.' But Anders would not be consoled. The scene reminded me of my little son back home, Kabir Erik.

The train pulled out at 9 o'clock, on the dot. Stavanger, my destination, was nine long hours away. The train was comfortable, clean and fast, though the coaches looked rather old, from the early 1970s perhaps. We were soon out of Oslo's peripheral towns, out in the vastness of lakes, mountains and forests, the wealth Norway is better known for.

I had taken Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* to read on the journey, but the book was completely forgotten as I got lost in the scenic beauty. Nature had decked herself in glorious splendour, and the trees, the lakes and the birds were a feast for the eyes. The

halt at Kristiansand lasted almost half an hour. The train crew was also replaced there. Anne Larsen, who took the vacant seat next to me, explained that Kristiansand is the capital of southern Norway and an important communications centre, linking southern Norway with England, Denmark and the Netherlands by air and sea.

Another few hours of scenic beauty, a few halts and a long chat with Anne on the state of young women in Norway. Anne, who hailed from Narvik in North Norway, was studying at Kristiansand. An exceptionally charming girl. Hardly 20, she appeared quite mature in her thoughts. She planned to enter politics. 'We women have complete freedom in Norway. We are as free as men. But still 80 per cent of the top positions in business, administration and media are with the men', she said.

'Is that why you want to join politics?' I asked.

'I'm not sure. But I believe that there should be more women in politics and corporate sectors. It is not enough to have one Gro Harlem Brundtland. We need many more like her in politics alone. Then we need women like her in other spheres, like banking, business and media', she said.

'You seem to be a fan of [Prime Minister] Gro Harlem Brundtland.'

'Me! and her fan! No way! I belong to the Conservative Party. But she is a very strong woman. There can be no doubt about it. But even she has now begun to look tired. She has mellowed', Anne said.

'So who are your idols?'

'Golda Meir; I think she was great. Hanna Kvanmo of the Norwegian Socialist Left party. You see, she was so lovable and strong. Then your Indira Gandhi.'

'You liked Indira Gandhi. Do you think she was a great woman?'

'Sure. She was as great as her father Mahatma Gandhi.'

I told her that Indira Gandhi was the only daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, free India's first Prime Minister, and not of the Mahatma.

She exclaimed, 'What! No! Really? Oh, what a fool I am!' 'You're not the only one. Millions in the world have the same idea', I said.

Stavanger railway station was small and a bit too quiet. Evidently, not many travelled by trains from here.

Stavanger, the oil capital of Norway, is a small city, but it has the air of an important, bustling business city with its tall bank buildings, modern hotels and an international airport. Since the discovery of oil, Stavanger has become 'an apple city' for Norwegians, a city of opportunities and missed opportunities. Over the past two decades it has grown beyond recognition.

Lina, a taxi driver I met outside the hotel, disagreed. 'Stavanger's best time is over', she said. 'The city has stabilised now. Just like our oil industry. It has matured and stabilised. It is no longer a city of opportunities.'

'But you like Stavanger, anyway', I commented.

'I love it. It is small but it is very international. People from all over the world come here on business. So it has developed a very special character. Stavanger is the only truly international city in Norway', she said.

'Would you not rather like to live in a big city like Oslo or Copenhagen?'

'No, Stavanger is big enough for me. We have everything here—night clubs, good life, jobs. It is a lively city. Stay here longer and you'll agree with me.'

The long walk around downtown and the harbour was pleasant. At night, the city's skyline was spectacular. I wondered how Stavanger looked like before they struck oil around here and changed it for ever.

'Please take me to Statoil', I told the taxi driver.

'Which office, sir? They have several offices in and around this city', he asked.

I gave him the full address. He said that was Statoil's headquarters.



It was a massive, imposing office complex housing the heart and the brain of Statoil, the Government-owned company which looks after most of the country's oil wealth. Ever since it was first discovered more than two and a half decades ago, oil wealth has changed the face of Norway. Today it constitutes 40 per cent of Norway's total exports.

Einar Bergh, an information officer, received me at Gate Number 4. He said he had made all the arrangements for my visit. Even so it took us a full fifteen minutes to pass through the different security checks.

I commented, 'That was quite an experience. I've never experienced such elaborate checks ever before. Entry here must be more difficult than to the Pentagon, I guess.'

'Have you been to the Pentagon?' he asked curiously.

'Me? Oh, no! I've only read about it in the papers.'

Oil is an industry of great strategic importance to Norway, and it should cause no surprise if to Norwegians Statoil has an aura which is no less than the Pentagon has to the United States. Many Norwegians in the past had criticised their Government for putting too much emphasis on the oil sector at the cost of the country's traditional industries, like shipping. But things are changing for a more balanced dependence on oil.

Einar offered to take me around the building. It turned out to be a long walk along various corridors, lasting hardly forty minutes. Evidently, a foreigner like me could not be invited inside any of the hundreds of rooms and halls lining the corridors. But I could feel the atmosphere there. Everything looked organised with military precision. Everyone I saw in the corridors or from some open doors looked like members of a special task force on an important mission.

I thanked Einar for his help but said that I wished I could have seen more, and talked to people I wished.

He said, 'The problem is to find time. Otherwise I could arrange it.'

Giving me the history of the discovery of oil in Norway,

Einar said that it all started in the autumn of 1962 when the Philips Petroleum Company applied for permission for wildcat drilling for oil on the Norwegian continental shelf. Soon they had the permission. They tried at ten different places but failed. They wanted to pack off, but the bureaucrats concerned pointed to the contract and insisted that they must try a couple of more places. Philips went back to the seashore, half-heartedly. But this time they hit oil. 'Sometimes', Einar said, 'bureaucracy's single track thinking can also be productive.' He later organised a slides and facts presentation on Statoil for me—a typical public relations show, and boring.

We lunched at a Chinese restaurant. Then he offered to take me to a Gullfaks oil platform under construction nearby.

It was a massive structure of unbelievable proportions. Einar said it was going to be the biggest oil platform in the world. 'It's all steel and cement. With the amount of steel that would go into it you could construct four Eiffel Towers', he said. I whistled in surprise.

He asked, 'Don't you believe me?'

'Of course I believe you. I whistled in surprise, you see', I said.

Einar Bergh dropped me at NSB Reisebureau, a travel agency in downtown Stavanger. I had called them in the morning giving my travel plan, with the exact details.

'So, when can I collect my tickets?' I asked the girl at the counter.

'Give me two more hours, please! It is complicated the way you have set up your itinerary for Central and Northern Norway', she said.

'All right', I said. 'I'll be back in two hours.'

I walked down to the old town. The old Stavanger is flooded with old-world charm, with narrow lanes, neat-looking old houses, cute-looking street water taps and a few tiny shops. One had to make an effort to remind

oneself that one was in Stavanger, the high-tech oil capital of Norway.

There were two wooden benches in what looked like an open back yard of a house. A man of 65 or so sat alone on one of the benches. I went and sat next to him. He looked quite forlorn. 'Do you speak English, sir?' I asked him.

'Well, I think I speak good English. I was a sailor with a British company for 10 years.'

'Oh, that is very good', I said. I introduced myself.

'Welcome to Stavanger! I hope you're enjoying your stay here', he said.

'Yes, yes. But I enjoyed visiting this old city. It is so special', I said.

'I am glad to hear it. This is our history. Many young people don't seem to realise it', he said, ruefully.

'Are you from Stavanger, sir?'

'Please call me, Bjørn. That is my name. This "sir" looks too formal to me, too British. We Norwegians are not Brits. We're very informal people', he said. 'To answer your question, yes, I belong to Stavanger. I was a farmer before I opted for a career in shipping.'

'Why did you give up farming? I understand you've a very fertile land in this area', I asked.

'The Stavanger area is the bread basket of Norway. We produce so much of grains and other things here. Also, we staunchly believe in God, unlike other Norwegians, particularly those in Oslo and Trondheim', he said.

'But why did you quit farming? Was it to get more time to pray?'

He persisted with his theme of religion. 'I pray a lot. Most people in this area are very religious. Some even call this area "the Bible Belt of Norway", whatever that may mean. God has been kind to this region. We have the best of land, and the best of people. And above all, we have oil. Do you know why this area is so well endowed? All because

we believe in God. All because we pray. All because we are religious.'

'You mean, oil was found near Stavanger because of the people's faith here in God. In other words, it was God's gift to his faithful people.'

'You are right. The whole country has been blessed with the wealth of oil because of us.'

'Somehow I am not convinced.'

'Could be because you are young and don't have time for God'.

'Could be, I don't know.'

Bjørn is a supporter of the Christian Democratic Party. 'Many of us here are. Brundtland's Labour Party does not have a strong base here because they are atheist, they don't believe in the church.'

'But you haven't still told me why you quit farming.'

'Haven't I? . . . For fun! What else . . . Sailing was great fun . . . good money . . . good girls . . . Ha! Ha! Ha!'

Back at NSB Reisebureau, the girl who had asked me to report two hours later was missing. 'She left a message for you', her colleague at the next counter said. 'She said she could not organise the tickets because you were still wait-listed on two Widerø (a feeder airline) sectors.'

'But I hope she has made my tickets for the other confirmed routes?' I asked.

'I'm afraid not. She had to leave. I also have to leave in a short while. We're closing for the day now.'

I saw red. I demanded to see the Chief Manager. He listened to me and promised to help.

'I have put two persons on the job. Please wait for 30 minutes. I understand your problem', he said a while later.

I protested, 'She has all the details. I had even spoken to her from Oslo three days ago, giving all the details.'

'I quite understand', he said. 'We have some problem with our computers.'

I had to return next morning. The girl who had caused the problem in the first place was there. I had to wait another full two hours before the tickets were finally in my hands.

'All confirmed', she said, forcing a smile.

'NSB Reisebureau—never again!' I vowed and left without thanking her.

*Stavanger Aftenblad* enjoys a big name in South Norway. It is a good newspaper, though a bit too colourful for my taste. It may be because I have a weakness for high-brow, dull looking dailies like *The New York Times* and *Le Monde*.

'We're the number one daily in this part of Norway', the editor, Kaare Haukaas told me.

'I can see that. Your coverage of local news seems very good. But you said you don't bring out an edition on Sunday. Why?'

'You see, in olden days our distribution system was solely dependent on school-going boys and girls. They would deliver the paper after school. We could not get them to come on Sundays because under a Child Security Act that would have been illegal. So there was no way we could distribute our copies on Sundays', Kaare explained.

Their distribution system was, by and large, still dependent on school children. 'The only difference is that now they do it for fun and some pocket money. They just pick up 60 or 70 copies for delivery in their neighbourhood. It costs them very little time. Plus their family gets a free copy. Earlier many did it for survival', he said.

He invited me to take a round of the place. The entire setup was impressive, very modern and computerised.

On our way back from the printing plant, Kaare introduced me to John Ove Lindø. 'He is our energy correspondent. Being a Stavanger daily, we've to be better in our coverage of oil industry. John makes it possible', he said.

'I try', John said modestly. He invited me for lunch.

John is an expert in his chosen specialisation and is well known in the Norwegian oil circles. 'For how long have you been following the oil scene?' I asked him.

'Rather long now, I would say. The oil industry is probably the most prestigious beat in our paper', he said. He also represents *Reuter* in Stavanger. John said he does it for fun. 'Also, because it gets me an international exposure.'

'Is it safe to specialise on a reserve like oil? What happens if you exhaust your reserves too fast?' I asked.

'Oh, that does not bother me. Oil will still be number one on our national business agenda for the next 20 years. Easily 20 years, if not more', he said. 'Though, in GNP terms, the share of oil has gone down from 19.5 per cent during the boom period. It is at a more healthy level now. Then we have gas. We have reserves to last for 200 years. That is, if we keep it only for our needs. But we have to export it. We're exporting it.'

'So oil has tremendously helped Norway to get richer', I commented. 'But how do you make sure that all Norwegians get the fruits of the oil boom?'

'That is easy because of our tax structure. Our tax regime is such that most national gains get evenly distributed. But I must tell you I'm not for this tax regime', John said.

'I'm told that your tax regime is aimed at creating an egalitarian society. It does not let you get very rich, but does not let you become a beggar either', I explained my understanding of the Norwegian tax structure.

'And you believe all that?' he asked, sarcastically.

I smiled. 'I don't know, really. I'm asking you.'

'Let us talk of better things. Let us concentrate on oil', he proposed.

But I was beginning to get late to leave Stavanger. 'I've yet to clear my hotel bill and pack', I said. I thanked him for a very useful meeting. I sincerely meant it.



# Bergen

Fortunately for me, the sea was quiet all the way to Bergen. I had been hesitant about taking the speedboat, being a man from the dry hinterlands of North India. I expected the journey to be a rollercoaster affair.

The smooth journey, fast but quiet, set all my fears at rest. Most of the 180 or so passengers were Norwegians. A little kiosk on the boat served newspapers, chocolates and even beer. Most of my co-passengers, however, had their noses in their newspapers.

Most Norwegians, I find, prefer to be aloof, be it on a boat, bus or in one of their numerous public parks. It does not seem to be a matter of arrogance or complex. Perhaps, they just like it that way, to be just by themselves, with their thoughts, dreams and frustrations.

Americans are different. They can become hard to stop. They just love chatting. And in India, a typical Indian can share his greatest life secret with you within minutes of his meeting you in a train, plane or wherever.

Norwegians, certainly, are different. Perhaps they are very shy.

'We may be shy, I don't know. But we certainly are not an arrogant people. Arrogant about what? We're such a small country. I would say we are just made that way. There is nothing more to it.' My interlocutor on the boat, sitting next to me, introduced himself as Knut.

Knut opined that it is in a Norwegian's nature not to chat up a stranger. 'But once they know you and you know



them, it can be a friendship for ever', he said. Knut is an engineer in an oil rig maintenance company at Stavanger.

Oil rigs and platforms were dotted along the way, evidence of oil-related activity in the region. After four or five halts we reached Bergen in four and a half hours, having covered 110 miles.

In Bergen, they say, an umbrella is more important than bread. Some say that children here learn to hold an umbrella even before they learn to take their first step. It is also said that children in Bergen are born with an umbrella in their hand.

The unusual speedboat journey was a magnificent way to get to this magnificent city. It was raining in Bergen when we landed there. I checked in at a modest hotel close to the city centre.

The rain would not let up. Seeing me waiting in the lobby for the rain to stop, the elderly hotel receptionist called out to me: 'Don't wait for the rain to stop. This is Bergen. Take an umbrella and go. Rain never begins or stops here. It just goes on.'

I thanked him, went back to my room, and emerged, armed with a 'Made in China' umbrella and a raincoat of Calcutta origins.

It was a quiet Saturday evening. Bergen seemed to be sleeping, with everything closed. The old magnificent buildings and the neighbouring hills, somnolent in the rain, seemed enchanted. Bergen was the most beautiful city I had ever seen in Norway.

I walked the city's cobbled roads for miles. My shoes were flooded. The salesman at the Bata shop in New Delhi, where I had bought them, had assured me that they were the toughest model they had. Evidently he had not heard of Bergen and its never-ending rains.

'So what did you see? How did you find Bergen?' the hotel receptionist asked while handing me the room keys.

'I loved it. I loved roaming around here,' I said enthusiastically.

'In spite of this rain and cold?'

'This city looks different. Different from most others I've seen,' I said.

It was obvious, from the way his eyes lit up, that he loved Bergen. 'I'm glad you think so', he said. 'I cannot live outside of Bergen. I'd rather die than leave this city.'

'Why? Is it because it is a beautiful place or for some other reasons?'

'I don't think I can explain it. This city has a soul you can communicate with. You feel the city is part of you and not the other way round. See what I mean?'

'I do', I said. 'Perhaps I'll understand still better after I've seen more of it.'

Severin J. Overaa comes from Ålesund. He has lived in Bergen for close to three decades now. 'Why? It is simple. Because Bergen is Bergen and I love it!' he said, joining me for breakfast.

He proposed to take me out on a kind of bird's-eye view trip of Bergen. He first took me on a hill, near a museum that earlier served as a fire station and gave me a short, brilliant briefing on the general history and layout of the city. The view from where we stood was spectacular.

'Bergen was once capital of Norway. Do you know that, Narendra?'

'No. I did not! Was that before Trondheim?'

'I don't recollect the exact period. But it was some time in the 12th century. We'll check that up when you visit my place.'

We visited an ancient castle built by King Haakon, a beautiful park, the harbour area, the university area and the old market area.

Bergen used to be a key trade centre during the Hansa period in Germany. Dry fish was brought here from different parts of the country, mainly North Norway, and exported to Germany and other European countries. The

business was a virtual monopoly of German merchants.

'How do you look at it in retrospect—the exploitation of Norway by Germans?' I asked Severin.

'I think it was exploitation. But many historians don't. They see it differently, in a more matter of fact manner.'

The impact of Hansa Germany on Bergen is still strong. The influence of Hansa architecture is prominent in several old buildings. Some buildings from that period, near the harbour, have been declared buildings of national importance. Many Norwegians in this area have old fashioned German family names. The most popular brand of beer here is also called Hansa. 'You must try it. It has a very special taste', Severin said.

Severin loves his Toyota car for 'its reliability and technology'. He invited me for a short drive a little outside the city so that I could see a little more of Bergen.

On our way back, almost abruptly, he remarked, 'We Norwegians are racist.'

'Racist? Do you really mean it, Severin?' I asked.

He elaborated. 'You see, when we have immigrants from countries like Sweden or the United States we don't mind it. We in fact don't even notice it. But if you are from India, Vietnam or Africa, Norwegians look down upon you. Do you know why?'

'No.'

'Because they think you're poor and have come to Norway because they're rich. That you are after their Kroners.'

'But, Severin, how would you explain that attitude?'

'We're a very narrow minded people. We look at the world with tinted glasses and do not really see the way it exists. We think everything Norwegian is good and great, all that we have is the best and all that we think is right.'

'But Norway has many newspapers, radio and television and Norwegian journalists travel the world over. I'm sure they tell Norwegians more objectively about other societies and countries?'

'Sure, our journalists go all over the world. But the way they report only entrenches Norwegians in their old prejudices.'

Severin, who looked on the wrong side of 50, said that the first coloured man he saw was as late as in 1953. 'The fact is that most Norwegians are not comfortable with coloured people around. The way they behave, though not necessarily in front of the coloured people, is definitely racist', he said.

Severin is a true internationalist both in mind and in his activities. He is planning to set up an international cultural centre in Bergen, 'To tell Norwegians about foreign cultures and to tell the world about our culture', he said. He evidently expects other Norwegians to be as internationalist as he is. But that is a tall order. That is what perhaps makes Severin fulminate against racism among his countrymen. I asked him if I could publish our conversation verbatim, considering the sensitive topic. 'Most certainly. Why not?' he said.

*Bergens Tidende* is among the three best newspapers in Norway, together with *Aftenposten* and *Dagens Næringsliv*. In circulation it is provincial but in outlook it is national and international. Broadsheet, thick and serious, it has a distinct personality. To me it appears to be both traditional and modern at the same time. Everything about *Bergens Tidende* is impressive—its history, its presentation, its coverage of national and international affairs. With its circulation exceeding 100,000 copies a day, *Bergens Tidende* is read by over 300,000 Norwegians in the city itself and in the western counties of Hordaland and Sogn og Fjordane.

I spent a whole day learning about this great newspaper. Its offices are housed in a modern seven storey building.

'I am glad you share the view that we're a great

newspaper', Normann Kirkeeide, managing news editor, said. Normann appeared to me to be a very warm and brilliant journalist. Soon we were friends. Normann has a functional office with scores of newspaper clippings pinned on to the wall, many of them from *The Telegraph* and *The Times* of London. There was also a letter from Edward Heath, the former British Prime Minister. 'I interviewed him recently. That is how this letter is here', Normann explained. 'It was an experience to interview Heath.' He later introduced me to another senior editor who, however, wished not to be identified.

'Have you been around in this building?' the senior asked.

'Yes, thank you. I have a reasonably good idea of the functioning of *Bergens Tidende* by now.'

He had joined the paper over thirty years ago as a raw journalist. He has a number of ideas to make his paper an even greater daily than it is.

'What Norwegian daily would you rate as the best?' I asked him.

'That is a difficult question. I think we're among the best. *Aftenposten* is very good, of course. Honestly, it is hard to answer such a question. If I say that we're not the best in the country, many of my colleagues here would not approve of it.'

'I understand. All right, what is an ideal newspaper from your point of view?'

'A newspaper with the credibility of *Aftenposten* and the dynamism of *Verdens Gang*.'

'This is what you would like *Bergens Tidende* to be? Is this what your plans are all about?'

'May be! I don't know yet. I'm still working on it.'

'Do you have any plans to expand to other cities?'

'Yes, very much. But we have this "Bergen" in our name. This makes it a little difficult to sell it outside. Perhaps we should rename *Bergens Tidende* as *BT* only. We even had a dummy prepared at one stage, but the top management

opposed it. A few of them have a sentimental attachment to its name and masthead.'

Later in the evening Normann took me sight-seeing. The more you see of Bergen, the more it grows on you. Oslo no doubt has character, but in front of Bergen it looks somewhat faceless. If Oslo were not the capital, Bergen certainly would have been the gateway to Norway.

But even Bergen is not all perfection. Some of its landmarks are truly ugly. Like the memorial in the heart of the city for the sailors. It appeared to me like a rotten loaf of bread. I asked Anne Marit, a young girl who was standing there what she thought of it. She, too, thought it was ugly.

Anne Marit—I could not get her surname—has lovely black hair, much like Indians.

'Are you a Norwegian?' I asked her.

'Yes, very much.'

'But how come your hair is black?'

'Oh, many Norwegians in this part of the country have black hair.'

'How so?'

'Bergen was the main trading area in olden days . . . sailors came from Spain, Italy . . . all over . . . they loved our nature and people . . . they loved our women . . . and we have black hair', she narrated shyly, in halting English. 'My English not good', she said.

'You mean to say that all Norwegians with black hair have southern European blood in them?'

'I don't know that. But my hair . . . good. I like my hair. Black hair on the Norwegian complexion pretty . . . don't you think so?'

'Oh, yes. I think you're a beautiful girl.'

'Because . . . black hair', she said. 'Do you understand?'

'You mean you look beautiful because of your black hair.'

'Yes, I mean that.'

Normann Kirkeeide has a magnificent bungalow atop a hill, overlooking a fjord that has a breath-taking view. He introduced me to his children.

His study was full of newspapers and newspapers and newspapers. On the wall was a touching poster where a child is shown accusing Rupert Murdoch of robbing his father of his job. Evidently, Normann keeps track of events in Britain and its press, something that comes quite naturally to most of us in India for historical reasons.

I asked his son if he would also want to be a journalist when he grew up.

'I'm not sure. Perhaps!' he said.

'But do you think that your father has a great job?'

'I don't know. But I know he likes his job', he said.

How right he was! Normann is a born journalist. An excellent, hard working journalist. The kind of journalists that make *Bergens Tidende* what it is—a great daily.

Normann had strongly recommended that I should not leave Bergen without speaking to Bjørn Vidar Lerøn, special correspondent of *Bergens Tidende* on oil and energy matters. I called Bjørn in the morning to set up a meeting. 'My pleasure. When would you like to come?' he asked.

'In an hour from now. Say at 10 o'clock.'

'Perfect. Please come. I'll meet you down at the reception', he said.

It had been raining even since I set foot in Bergen. As I looked out of my hotel window, dense, dark clouds sat over the top and slopes of the mountain yonder. The mountain looked totally submerged in the wild vastness of Bergen clouds.

I wished that I could get a glimpse of this city under sunshine. Putting on my raincoat, I left on foot.

I had been walking with an open umbrella until I was nearly at the doorsteps of the *Bergens Tidende* offices when I suddenly realised that the passers-by were not

carrying open umbrellas. It was not raining! Just a few days in Bergen, and the habit of carrying an open umbrella had grown on me.

Bjørn was at the reception waiting for me. 'Welcome to *Bergens Tidende*', he said, in his mild voice.

'Contrary to popular belief, Norway is basically a gas country and not an oil country', Bjørn said, while we were waiting for the lift to take us up to his office.

'A gas country? I did not know that. The whole world knows that you're an oil country. Some people even call Norway the Kuwait of Scandinavia.'

'Right, but look at our known reserves of oil and gas. We'll run out of oil within the next 35 years while we have gas reserves to easily last us 200 years, if not more.'

'But what will happen after you have run out of oil? What happens to your economy which is so much dependent on oil?'

'If we continue to exploit our oil reserves at the current pace, we don't have to worry for the next 30 to 35 years. After that we'll have gas to replace oil as an important element in our economy.'

I asked, 'Does the world outside know about Norway being a gas power?'

'I think people know it. In Europe, it is well known. We already have gas deals with some countries. No, I think it is well known.'

There was so much literature on the subject in Bjørn's office that it sort of smelled oil and gas. Press releases, research papers, newspapers, magazines, books, all related to oil and gas. Bergen has never forgiven the Government for crowning Stavanger as the oil capital of the country, a title that Bergen feels it deserved.

'It should have been Bergen, absolutely', Bjørn observed. 'Why?'

'First, because historically Bergen has been a key business city. Secondly, 80 per cent of the oil reserves are in the area off Bergen coast.'



Bjørn said that the first oil discovery took place near Stavanger and that became the basis for selecting that city as the headquarters of the Norwegian oil activities.

'If that is how *Bergens Tidende's* Energy Correspondent feels then I think I understand it', I said.

'Not only me or my paper. The majority of people in Bergen feel this way. Anyway, the way business is going it is only a matter of time before Bergen becomes the real oil capital of Norway. Most operational activities related to oil will move to Bergen while Stavanger will continue to be the administrative centre', he said.

'You mean Bergen will soon be the de facto oil capital of Norway?' I asked.

'You wait and see.'

'But how long would it take?'

'Well, the process is on. It is now only a matter of time.'

'Is that your personal view or that of your paper as well?'

'I am part of the newspaper. And as you know, *Bergens Tidende* is an important part of what is known as Bergen', he said.

Bergen has traditionally been an important shipping centre. Many here believe that the emergence of the oil industry has almost destroyed the local shipbuilding industry. Bjørn disagreed. 'Oil or no oil, the Norwegian shipbuilding industry was destined to be in trouble. In fact the oil boom has given new opportunities to many entrepreneurs who had trouble surviving in shipbuilding. Some of them have made fortunes, thanks to the oil related construction', Bjørn said.

Bjørn has quick and convincing answers to every question one may ask on his field of specialisation. He strongly recommended that I speak to the Oil Ministry people in Oslo to get the Government view on the subject.

'Is that because the Government has a different opinion?' I asked him. 'I really don't much believe in talking to Government spokespersons. Most often, it is not very useful.'

'I agree. But still, talk to them if you get the time.'

'Please tell me', I asked Bjørn, rising to leave, 'Why is Norway not a member of OPEC?'

'That is for political reasons. You know how OPEC behaved with the United States and other NATO countries during the 1973-74 oil crisis! We are a member of NATO, as you know. Politically, we cannot afford to be in OPEC. It would not be in our national interest. As simple as that.'

'But you do attend OPEC's meetings. Don't you?'

'A Norwegian State delegation is always present in the city where an OPEC meeting is in progress. But we don't participate. We just go there to observe from a distance.'

Outside, it was raining again, heavily.

I had asked Severin Overra if he could arrange my visit to the Bergen University's Centre for Development Studies and the renowned Christian Michelsen Institute (CMI). He arranged all this and even offered to accompany me around. It was a rare privilege to have a friend along who knew almost everyone who mattered in Bergen and knew the city like the palm of his hand. Above all, one could talk just about anything with him frankly, without bothering too much about offending the Norwegian in him.

The Centre for Development Studies is a very young institution. But Severin said that it would soon be the foremost institute of development studies in Norway. We began an interesting talk with a couple of young scientists there on the concept of development in the North and the South, but we had to interrupt it midway to keep our appointment at the Christian Michelsen Institute (CMI) of Science and Intellectual Freedom.

Christian Michelsen, shipowner and a former Prime Minister of Norway, left the major part of his fortune to a foundation for the benefit of an institute for independent scientific research and other cultural and socially oriented

studies. His sole condition was that the institute must have a solid anchorage in Bergen.

CMI has very carefully seen to it that its mentor's feelings for his beloved Bergen are not hurt. Today, for many scholars from around the world, Bergen is the most beautiful foreign city in the world, thanks to CMI.

Rated as one of the best institutes of its kind in the world, CMI is located in the rural, scenic environs at Fantoft, about seven kilometres from the city centre. It was started in 1930 in a rented building but today has a sprawling complex.

Everything about CMI bears the stamp of excellence. A scientist there was assigned to show us around. Their facilities must be among the best in the world. The library appeared fabulously well endowed.

I had wanted to see Just Faaland, CMI's well-known researcher and economist, but he was out of the country.

Sunil Silva, Head of the Institute's Powder Technology Division, is a bright, energetic scientist bubbling with drive. Sunil comes from Sri Lanka and has made it big in Norway, all through his hard work. He has lived in different parts of Europe for over two decades now.

Sunil is proud of his present position at CMI. But a good part of his heart still seems to me in the region he has left behind—the poverty stricken, underdeveloped South Asia. 'I live here in Western comforts but I often feel frustrated as I am not able to do much for the people I belong to', he said. 'The problem is, there are so many problems and bureaucratic hurdles [in South Asia] in whatever you want to do that you get fed up.' Sunil had recently been to New Delhi to offer a powder technology project he thought would be of great use to India. His proposal was still stuck somewhere in the bureaucratic bumbledom of India, but he was hopeful of success soon.

Sunil has dreams and dogged enthusiasm. He is an example that if you really have something different to offer, if you are really bright, Norway has much to offer you. I have

met several other Asians who said that they could not have been better placed back in their own country. At the same time, many Asians believe that Norwegians are racist, prejudiced against any skin colour that is not white.

I brought up this topic again with Severin. I commented that except for what I experienced at the airport, I had not really come across any discrimination so far. He laughed and said: 'You have to stay and live here longer to experience it.'

'Could it be because foreigners eat into job opportunities?

'No, no, no! Then why don't they discriminate against an American or a Dane or a Swede? They also eat into job opportunities!'

Bergen's Haukeland Sykehus (hospital), a huge multi-storeyed complex, high-tech, very modern, is Norway's pride. Understandably so. It must be one of the best equipped hospitals in the world. The dedication of the staff to the care of patients was the best I have seen.

'We know that we are rated as the best hospital in Norway. We have to work very hard to live up to that reputation', said the man in-charge of the campus. He showed us around.

The X-ray department was huge and impeccably organised. They could fish out a six-year old X-ray plate in just two minutes. I was particularly interested in visiting the Oncology Department because cancer is the second biggest killer in Norway after heart disease.

Dr Knut, who showed me around the Oncology Department, said that they have a fairly ambitious cancer research programme together with some other Nordic hospitals. 'We have also achieved something but it is still a long, long way to go', he said.

'Do you succeed in curing many cases that come to you?'

'Not exactly. It depends on what kind of cancer it is. In serious cases, we prolong the life span with our treatment

and pray for success. Most patients get a little more time to live. But as you know cancer of a serious nature still remains incurable.'

'How do you, as a doctor, rate the Norwegian health care system?'

'One of the best in the world. Probably the best.'

I tested out this response with seven patients in the hospital. Four agreed with Dr Knut's assessment. Two were not sure. The last one, an aged lady, said: 'Our health system is terribly sick. Just open your eyes wide and you will know it.'

From Haukeland Sykehus, Severin took me to his home for dinner. It was a magnificent house sitting atop a small hill overlooking hundreds of houses all around. His wife had cooked delicious pizza. I was tired after the day's wanderings and took leave of them early.

She wanted me to visit them the next day again. I said that, much as that would give me pleasure, I had to decline since I had to catch the evening boat.

'Oh, that is a pity. All right, we'll come to see you off. Then we'll have some more time to talk to you.'

'That will be nice. But please make sure it is not inconvenient to you', I said.

'We'll come. No problem.'

The extremely kind Severin dropped me back at the hotel. I could only repay all his kindnesses by sincerely wishing him 'Tusen Takk', which in Norwegian means 'a thousand thanks to you'.

How quickly human beings adapt to new surroundings! Only a few days ago, I had waited in the lobby for rain to stop. Now rain was not even in my thoughts. Whenever I had to go out my umbrella and raincoat fell on me as naturally as my watch or money.

I spent the next several hours visiting the home-museum of Edvard Grieg by the Nordaas Lake. Edvard

Grieg, the great music composer, is affectionately remembered by Norwegians. My next stop was the famous Stave Church at Fantoft. Christianity is over nine centuries old in Norway. I was told that the Fantoft church is almost as old.

I could not resist walking around Old Bergen once again, for the third time. I walked around, forcing myself to be leisurely, though I had to be ready to leave.

Severin and his wife came to see me off and dropped me at the quay well in time to check in on *Midnatsol* for Ålesund. *Midnatsol* was a spectacular boat. Run by the TFDS shipping company which is a century old, the vessel has 4,200 tons displacement and can carry up to 410 passengers in great comfort. It has plush cabins, bar and restaurant and lounges.

Known as the coastal steamer service, the route is very popular with tourists. It leaves Bergen every evening and goes right up to Kirkenes in the far north in a leisurely seven days. Halts on the way cover such interesting places as Bodø, Lofoten, Tromsø and North Cape. Many foreign tourists take the round trip Bergen-Kirkenes-Bergen, which takes 13 days or so. A friend in Oslo had said that this coastal round trip is considered one of the most thrilling journeys in the world, a lifetime experience.

The captain announced a delay in the departure due to some snag in the engine. 'Our men are on the job and, hopefully, we'll soon be leaving Bergen', he announced.

'Funny, isn't it! Why didn't they check the engine before inviting us to board the vessel?' said an elderly, tall gentleman standing next to me in the front lounge.

'Well, it's the first time I'm experiencing delay in a departure', I said.

'What country are you from? Pakistan, I guess?'

'No, I come from India.'

'And what are you up to? Business?'

'I am a journalist.'

He introduced himself and his wife. 'We are Americans.'

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Neil Robertson said they were 'on a kind of pilgrimage here'. Norway was the country of his ancestors. 'My wife's grandfather belonged to Bergen. In my case, that was a long time ago but I still know some cousins here.'

The ship was leaving Bergen harbour. The view around, with mountains, the sea and the evening mist, was uplifting.

'The mountains look so beautiful from here', I said to Neil.

'Yeah, but I wonder how they manage to live in this country. They only have mountains in Norway.'

'But they love mountains, and in any case, they have developed their country very well.'

'Oh, yes. Everybody has refrigerators, freezers these days ... Oh, life has changed here since we were here last in 1964.'

'Refrigerators! I think they have a very high standard of living which is among the best in the world today', I protested.

Neil and his wife looked very rich. Evidently, they did not have any emotional attachment with Norway. They were here just for fun, perhaps just to pat themselves on the back for the wise decision their ancestors took in quitting Norway for greener pastures. They had their own set ideas about Norway and refused to see anything which did not comply with their own prejudices.

Most of the passengers were Americans, many on the wrong side of 60. All were armed with cameras, binoculars and all kinds of travel literature. I spoke to some of them. They appeared to be an emotional lot, people out to discover the land of their forefathers, and their roots, to get a feel of it.

Said Marie from California, 78 years old: 'This is where my grandfather sleeps in his grave. I wish I also would get my grave in the same west coast island, next to him. I love Norway.'

At about noon the next day, we anchored at Ålesund. I took a bus from there to Molde en route to Sundalsøra.

# Sunndalsøra

The approach to Sunndalsøra is through a narrow, long valley in the middle of high and steep mountains. The ice-carpeted mountains, shining in the mild sun of Norway, looked like swords menacing the sky. A beautiful fjord locked the captivating view at the other end.

I asked the taxi driver to take me to the youth hostel. He seemed unsure. 'Don't you know the way there?' I asked him.

'I do. But it's a bit far', he said.

'No problem! Let's go there, please.'

We were there after a drive of hardly ten minutes. He stopped at a cluster of wooden huts that looked neglected.

'Is this the place?' I was not sure.

'Yeah! This is the place.'

There was no proper reception area. A young, enthusiastic couple maintained it.

'Take any room. All rooms are vacant', the woman said.

'Give me a room that has the best view.'

'All right, here you are', she said, handing me the key.

The room was the most austere I had seen in Europe. It was right at the bottom of a steep mountain, so steep that my cap would have fallen—had I one on—if I wanted to see its summit.

Sunndalsøra is Norway's aluminium city. The pride of place goes to the Aardal & Sunndal Verk, an aluminium smelter. It has made this little kommune, called Sunndal,



of hardly 7,500 inhabitants one of the richest *kommunes* in Norway.

Life in Sunndalsøra revolves around the Verk. Almost 1,350 out of its 7,500 inhabitants work there. The rest of the working population are employed in local banks, institutions and services, which are indirectly dependent on the aluminium factory.

Sunndalsøra for this reason is a distinctive town, somewhat like Tundla, a small railway town in North India where I was born and grew up. Our gossip, jokes, dreams, frustrations, fears, everything turned around the railways. It becomes very difficult to part with such towns. Their personality becomes one with yours.

It was chilly and windy when I visited the Verk. A senior manager warmly received me at the gate and poured me some hot Norwegian coffee (It only means extra strong black coffee, produced, of course, somewhere in Latin America or Africa).

He then briefed me about the plant as any official would: 'Set up in early 1950s, we're among the oldest and best aluminium plants in the world. We produce very high quality aluminium. Mercedes cars, F-16 aircraft, they all use our aluminium. We have the best . . . We enjoy excellent reputation . . . Profit ratio so high . . .'

I went around the impressive-looking plant. It looked partly old, partly modern. I spoke to a number of workers. Most belonged to a trade union affiliated to Gro Harlem Brundtland's Arbeiderparti or Labour Party. They said that out of nine members of the board, three were their elected representatives.

Workers are, by and large, very well looked after in most Norwegian industrial establishments. Many in the Norwegian left movement would not agree, but almost all workers I spoke to at the Verk agreed that by and large Norwegian workers are a privileged lot compared with their counterparts in several other developed countries. All this has to do with Norway's history of this century,

which is largely the history of Norwegian labour movement and its success.

For alumina, the plant depends entirely on a 30,000 ton ship which makes a monthly trip to Australia. The plant was set up at Sunndalsøra because the region has plenty of cheap electricity. Electricity in abundance is a must to sustain an aluminium plant. Perhaps nothing else would have given this area a more stable industrial base.

Almost 18 per cent of the Verk's production in the form of ingots is consumed in the country. One-fourth of the production goes to Italy, and the rest to other countries.

Sunndal kommune's town hall is a graceful building. I asked to see Ola Bakken, who looks after the money matters of the kommune.

While waiting for him, I struck up a conversation with a local. 'Do you work for the Verk?' I asked him.

'Not directly. I work for a small local company which lives on the Verk.'

'You love Sunndalsøra, don't you? Where do you come from?'

'Do I love Sunndalsøra? Oh, I've never thought of it. Perhaps I do. I was born in Trondheim, but I have lived here for many years now. I think I like this place. I think I can say I love this place. I have already built a house here.'

'To me Sunndalsøra looks like a town sunk deep in a narrow valley, because of these steep mountains. Have you ever been up one of these mountains?'

'I love nature but I do not climb mountains. I have my own likings. I like to walk in the forest. I like fishing.'

Ola Bakken welcomed me warmly and invited me to his office upstairs. Ola has spent some time in Tanzania and has an interest in development problems.

'I am just trying to understand how the economy of your kommune functions', I said. 'It gets even more interesting because Sunndal is rated as one of the richest kommunes in Norway.'

'We are a small kommune in terms of population. But

in terms of area, we are fairly large. An elected body of 37 people's representatives run the affairs of the kommune. All heads of departments are accountable to this body.'

'But your job must not be so difficult because money is not a problem for your kommune!'

He laughed. 'You are right. In a way, money is not a problem. But my job certainly is not easy. Our kommune has a good economy but then we also have good expenses.'

One of his department's main jobs is to collect income tax from the local residents. In Norway, the kommune collects income tax, keeps one-third of it for itself and passes on the rest to the national government in Oslo. Almost 80 per cent of the kommune's income comes from income tax. 'But then', Ola said, 'our civil responsibilities are also very high. Education, health, social security, culture etc. fall on our account.'

'What percentage is spent on education, for instance?'

'Education is a priority area. Thirty-nine per cent our money is spent on this sector. I know in many countries, including perhaps India, allocation on education is poor.'

'You are right. It is unfortunate but you are right. Education is a neglected area in our part of the world. For instance, if a senior politician is appointed Education Minister, he or she feels insulted and marginalised. The result: the country has all these problems of violence and disorder, poverty and corruption', I said.

From the figures Ola gave the expenditure pattern of Sunndal kommune would be as follows:

General Administration	9 per cent
Education	39 per cent
Health	8 per cent
Social Security (including unemployment allowance)	20 per cent
Culture and Church	11 per cent
Road and other technical expenses	11 per cent
Miscellaneous	16 per cent

(The total works out to 114 per cent. It is possible that I got the figures wrong.)

Electricity distribution also is the kommune's responsibility, and not an independent utility.

There was very little to see around the town, but I walked round and around for full two hours so as to get a good feel of the place.

The tourist brochure strongly recommended a visit to Sunndal Parish Museum. I did not take very long there but learnt there that the first settlers arrived in Sunndal almost 4,000 years ago. 'They belonged to the so-called Fosna culture, and were hunters and trappers', said a booklet available there.

Norwegians are finicky about time, even in smaller places like Sunndalsøra. In India, in small towns appointments are very elastic. You are supposed to expect someone 'in the morning' or 'in the evening'. 'The evening' can be any time between 4 and 9 o'clock.

I had been invited by Erik (not his real name) and his family for dinner. He came on the dot at 7, driving his blue Volvo. 'Shall we start?' he asked.

'Yes, I am ready.'

Within five minutes we were at his splendid house. It had its own front garden and a backyard. 'This is an advantage of living in small towns', he said. He introduced me to his wife.

'Welcome to our home! It is the first time we have an Indian visiting us. Please make yourself comfortable', she said.

'Thank you', I said, 'you have a magnificent house.'

'You think so! Yes, we also think we have a nice house. We built it ourselves twenty years ago.'

'You mean you built it on your own?' I asked in wonder.

'Yes, ourselves! Are you surprised? In Norway, it is very common. Labour is very expensive here.'

Both of them work for the Verk. They seemed a happy couple. A friend related to them in Oslo had given me their address saying, 'You must call on them.'

'For how long have you been married?'

'Twenty-two years. Yes, almost.'

'Children?'

'Oh, yes, two. They will be here soon. We have also invited a couple, our neighbours, to join us for dinner', Erik said. 'Is it OK with you?'

'I'll enjoy it. I can assure you', I said.

I then asked her, 'How assertive can a wife be with her husband in day-to-day household matters?'

'Assertive? There is no question of being "assertive" because both husband and wife enjoy equal rights, socially as well as legally.'

'You mean, it is the same in all societies in Norway—rural, urban, farming?' I asked.

'Well, I should not generalise. By and large, what I said holds true. But even here wife-beating was very common say until three decades ago. It has changed a lot now. But it does not mean that wife-beating has totally stopped now. It is still there in some families. The difference is that husbands also get beaten up by their wives these days', she said.

In the meantime, their children and the couple from next door had also joined us. Erik introduced me to them and explained my interest in the husband-wife relationship in Norway.

'Oh, this man, my husband, is very bossy. But I don't have to listen to him', said the visiting lady. They also did not wish to be identified.

I asked, referring to her comment, 'Are you joking? Or do you mean it?'

'I mean it. I am serious. I am a serious woman. Look, we love each other. That is why we live together. But it is his nature to try to boss wherever he can. He tries it with me but I ignore it because I love him. But the good thing is he knows

where to stop, when enough is enough', she said, looking teasingly at her husband, who looked in his early 30s.

'Do you agree with her?' I asked him.

He said with a laugh, 'We love each other and that is what keeps us together. Otherwise, we'll have difficulty in living as husband and wife.'

'But what happens when other factors take over and love fades?'

'That often leads to a split, divorce. But we are a mature people and we understand each other as well as we love each other.'

'Well, here I was talking in general', I said.

Erik's wife announced dinner. Her fish soup was piping hot and delicious. By now I was getting used to Norwegian dinners—sometimes delicious, sometimes flat but never, never filling. At Erik's place I gorged myself.

Resuming our earlier discussion, Erik's wife said, 'Young couples these days lack patience. Just a little noise over some issue and they rush for divorce. To me they appear immature, not serious about marriage.'

She continued: 'In the old days, the wife was often dependent on the husband. Today, it has all changed. A woman can earn as much as her husband, if not more. So they want a relationship where husband and wife have genuinely equal rights. And why not? But what I find is that often the sense of maturity is missing on both sides.'

It was an evening of lively conversation and delicious food. I stayed on for an hour longer and later walked down to my place.

During the bus journey from Sunndalsøra to Oppdal, which lasted a fleeting 80 minutes, I felt I had captured a fleeting glimpse of eternity.

Oppdal is a small town on the Oslo-Trondheim trunk rail route. The fast train to Trondheim, once the capital of Norway, was due three hours later. The three hours that

I spent at the railway station flew fast. I walked around, and spoke to some local people. An old man strolling with his dog said: 'I hate these fast trains because my dog hates them'. A bus driver believed that Oppdal was the most livable place in the whole of Norway. An eight-year-old girl in front of her big house asked me wonderingly, 'Why did you opt for a dark skin?'

I answered, 'You don't opt for it, dear! You just get it from Him. I mean from God.' I could understand the confusion in her tender mind.

'But Jesus Himself is white. He even has blue eyes, like me. You can see that in a church not far from here', she argued in her soft voice, baffled.

'But Jesus could not have blue eyes at least. You know He came from Asia, like me', I said.

She just smiled back, signalling the conversation was getting too heavy for her. Hurriedly, she went to her room and picked up a picture post card of Oppdal and gave it to me as a parting gift.

Back at the railway station, I hung around at a restaurant. When I looked up at the ceiling, I was struck by its quirky decor: they had fixed chairs and tables upside down on it, to give the appearance of a ceiling mirror reflecting the seating arrangement on the floor.

Built in 1917, Oppdal station is in the lap of a huge mountain. It appears to be a very small station which receives only a few trains daily. Its tiny waiting room with just three wooden benches looked like it could do with a little attention of the railway authorities.

When the train arrived I asked the conductor if there was a seat available in the first class compartment. 'Yes, but only in a non-smoking section', he said. It was a comfortable compartment. Soft-coloured, revolving seats, wide windows, newspapers, carpet. I enjoyed every minute of the travel. 'This is one of the new coaches introduced recently by the Norwegian State Railways', the conductor informed me. He was a friendly soul. I told him that my father also worked

for the railways in India before he retired some years ago.

'But you did not want to join the railways?' he asked.

'Me? Oh, no! I always wanted to be a journalist. But I love railways.'

At Trondheim an Indian friend was waiting for me. I spent the night with him and returned to Oslo next morning by an SAS flight to keep my appointment with Carl I. Hagen.





# Carl I. Hagen and Gro

'Norwegians are a very difficult people to change', remarked Carl I. Hagen, setting the tone for our long interview. 'It is even more so now when social democracy has been around here for so long.'

I had been warned by friends that he hates people from poor countries like India. 'Be warned. This man is crazy and unpredictable', a friend in Oslo alerted me minutes before I was to leave for the Storting to meet him. 'I'll see. I believe it will be interesting anyway', I said. I was prepared for the worst. But Carl I. Hagen turned out to be someone I took to from the word go.

He was a volcano of energy and enthusiasm. A smouldering volcano who could hardly hide his dudgeon for not getting as many Norwegians behind him as he would like. Carl's vision is to take Norway planets away from its present economic and social setup. He wants to uproot Norway from democratic socialism—something for which Norway is better known worldwide. He wants to take his country in the direction of extreme right—socially, economically and, of course, politically.

Middle-aged and dashing, Carl I. Hagen is easily one of the brightest politicians I have come across in Europe. It is impossible to agree with him on most issues, but his strength and honesty are unquestionable. Even if one does not agree with his ideas or style it is comforting to have people so transparently honest in a country's public life.

He is the supreme leader of Norway's Fremskrittsparti or

Progress Party. This young party, set up only two decades ago, is his medium for change. He talks straight and to the point. No mincing or curling of words for him. This quality has attracted many Norwegians to his fold, particularly youth, but many have told me that even Carl I. Hagen is changing, becoming like others.

'Please go through this paper quickly before we start talking', he suggested, handing me a rather poorly written, photocopied profile of his party. 'It is not very well written. But it is in English and you will get some idea.' The pamphlet read:

'The Progress Party is an anti-socialistic, anti-communistic liberal party. It aims at stronger market economy, less State bureaucracy, minimum of State interference and reduced taxes and duties. The party is committed to:

- elimination of income tax and transition to consumption tax;
- reduction in the size of bureaucracy;
- private enterprise rather than State enterprise;
- harder punishments to drug pushers and criminals;
- more care for the elderly, the sick and the handicapped;
- a strong defence based on Norway's continued membership of NATO.'

I said, 'It looks like your party plans are aimed to turn the present Norwegian system upside down. Many Norwegians may not be supporting you for this very reason. An average person feels nervous about an upside down kind of change. I believe it is the same with people all over the world.'

He answered, 'You may have a point. But support for our party is growing at a fast pace for this very reason. Because we want to change Norway. Because we want to

think and work for Norway first.'

'But many say that you want to change Norway into a selfish, very inward-looking society—a country happy and in love with itself only—while, as you know, Norway is better known in the world as a land of concerned and generous people. I mean concerned for those who are unfortunate and underdeveloped.'

'Who says I am not concerned about unfortunate or underdeveloped people? We have lots of such people in our country. As a Norwegian politician, my duty is to be first concerned about our own unfortunate and underdeveloped people. Thanks to the present system, we have lots of them in this country. Believe me! You stay here a little longer and you will know the truth.'

'So you are against Asians and Africans coming to your country in search of living?'

'Since we do not have enough jobs for our people, it is quite logical to oppose migration of foreigners into the country.'

'You mean, you oppose even white foreigners coming here for jobs. I mean Swedes, Danes or Americans.'

'I said "all foreigners". And I repeat "all foreigners".'

'That means you are not particularly against blacks and browns from the Third World.'

'Why should I be?'

'I don't know. I asked you this question because many say you are racist, that your party is racist, that you are particularly against browns and blacks. They compare you with the French leader Le Pen and such other ultra right leaders.'

'You can listen to them if you want. But they are my political opponents. Now that they can't compete with me on the political front, they spread such talk, such allegations. We even have these so-called blacks and browns in our party.'

'Tell me, Mr Hagen', I said, 'how do you feel when you see a poor Third World person out there on Karl Johans

Gate? A man in tatters, undernourished, run down by a civil war or famine back home?"

'The same way as I feel when I see a poor Norwegian. The same way.'

'But this Third World man may be in a desperate situation. He may even die if he is to be thrown out of Norway.'

'Just look beneath the surface and you will be appalled to discover the kind of desperate problems our so-called developed country is faced with. We have to take care of them first.'

'But some politicians say that the ban on foreigners coming here for jobs should be lifted.'

'Who says so?'

'A senior leader of the Socialist Left Party (SV).'

'I am not surprised. But who told you this?'

'Theo Koritzinsky. He said his party would lift the ban if voted to power', I said.

'But he has never said so in the Storting. Not that I know of.'

'Anyway! But what about Norwegian assistance to poor countries? What about NORAD, this State agency for development cooperation? Are you against such arrangements also?'

'Well, I disagree with the principles of taxed State development assistance. People should send money for help and assistance if they want to', Hagen said.

'So you think organisations like NORAD should not be there.'

'I don't think highly of NORAD. In any case, I know very little about this agency. I have never been interested in NORAD as I do not agree with its very concept.'

'You seem to take a very narrow view of the world. We all live in an interdependent world and I don't think many Norwegians would agree with you in the long run.'

'Narrow view? No, I don't agree with you. We take a very realistic view of the world.'

'Do you agree with the developing countries' demand to

restructure the global economic system so that they can get economic rights and power due to them?"

"You mean, North-South dialogue?"

"Yes."

"I don't think you can achieve anything this way. It is not a practical idea. We pay for whatever we buy from the South. Most people in the developed countries probably will say the same thing. So how can you bring about this so-called New International Economic Order?"

"So you mean the world should be allowed to move on as it is."

"Allow free trade. Allow free trade within the North and the South. Allow free trade within Norway. Allow free trade everywhere. And you will see that the world is a much better place to live in."

"You mean it will also solve most of the world's economic problems."

"Yes, I believe so. Look at the problems of the so-called Third World. Most of their problems are because of too much political interference in the running of the economy", Hagen observed.

"But politicians do have to interfere in the economy. Ultimately, it is their responsibility. Is not it?"

"The economy runs best without any political interference. Switzerland is an example. Politicians have almost no power in that country. I favour the Swiss system. I would love to see Norway running without politicians at all."

"But what will happen to you and your party then?"

"That does not worry me. The country is more important."

"There are still politicians in Switzerland!"

"But they are different from Norwegian politicians. They know their limits."

There was a soft knock at the door. A lady entered, smiling. "Would you two like a cup of coffee?" she asked. "Yea, sure. Thank you!" I said. Her tone was very personal

toward Hagen. Perhaps his very private secretary, I thought. 'This is my wife, Eli. She also works as secretary in this office', he said, stopping my train of guesswork in its tracks.

'So both of you work for the same mission, same ideals?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Do you have children?'

'Yes, I have two from my first marriage, Elizabeth and Carl Axel Hagen. Then we have two children from Eli's first marriage. So we're a large family.'

'Your children must be proud of you?'

'I don't know, really. But I know they love me.'

'Do they also share your concern for change? Do they approve your philosophy?'

'They do from time to time, they don't from time to time.'

'You both work here in this office. And then I am sure you travel around a lot within the country. You must be getting very little time for the family.'

'Most politicians live with a bad conscience when it comes to their family and children. I am no different.'

'Time is precious.'

'Indeed! Indeed!'

'What do you do when you do find some time? Do you have any hobbies?'

'I have no hobbies. I find no time from politics. I read very little these days. Sometimes when I do find time I read detective novels or biographies of political competitors.'

'Of political competitors?'

'Yes.'

'What is the latest that you have read?'

'The biography of Reiulf Steen. He is a prominent leader of the Norwegian Labour Party . . .'

'I know him, I know him very well.'

'I enjoyed reading his biography. I respect him a lot.'

'I also have known him for a very long time. I think he is a wonderful person', I said.

'I agree with you. He is a wonderful person.'

'So even you can like a Social Democrat. I am a bit surprised. I thought you only hate Social Democrats.'

'If I were there in the 1930s or '40s, I also would have been a Social Democrat like Reiulf Steen.'

'Do you like Kaare Willoch of the Conservative Party?'

'He does not like to see my face, you know. I first met him in 1974. I respect him but it does not necessarily mean that I like him.'

'Who is your most favourite Norwegian?'

'In politics?'

'Not necessarily.'

'I would say my most favourite Norwegian is Wenche Foss, a leading actress.'

(In her seventies now, Foss is widely respected in Norway for her concern on social issues.)

'But why her?'

'Because she is such a positive person.'

Carl I. Hagen may like Wenche Foss for her positive approach to life. But many in Norway consider him a very negative person who is fast turning into a volcano out to destroy all traditional economic and political values that the country has painfully built over the decades.

'I know that. I am probably the hottest target in Norway today because of the ideals I work for. If some Norwegian politician is going to be assassinated I know it will be me, because I am very controversial and there are many in Norway who would like me to disappear from the scene. The sooner the better, they think', Hagen said.

'Political assassinations are common in the Third World. But in Norway, Scandinavia . . . It is hard to take what you are saying.'

'Why? What happened to Olof Palme? Sweden is in Scandinavia as you very well know. I get threats. I get phone calls, letters: "We'll kill you!". "I'll get you, bastard!"



I know the threat to my life is serious', Hagen said, worriedly. 'When I see a bunch of *Punks*, for instance, I am careful. I know they don't like me, I know they hate me.'

'So you always have to be very careful?'

'Yes, I am careful. But it is mainly because Eli wants me to be careful.'

Many Norwegians would avoid taking questions aimed at individuals. Not Carl I. Hagen. When I asked him what he thought about Socialist Left Party leader Theo Koritzinsky, he said, 'Nothing. I don't think about him at all. He is a dreamy, utopian person. He is talking theories, not politics.'

'There seems to be a lot of bad blood between you and Theo because he also does not hold you at a very nice level. He thinks you are a terrible person', I said. Hagen was again at his best. 'I know why he thinks I am terrible. It is because I speak the truth and because I am not a Communist.'

'Do you consider yourself closer to Reagan and Thatcher on economic issues?' I asked.

'I don't agree with them on all issues', he said.

'Then whose economic philosophy do you follow?'

'Of British economist Adam Smith.'

'That means if you become the Prime Minister, you will introduce Smith economics in Norway.'

'I'll love to be Prime Minister of Norway. But I know I'll never be accepted as Prime Minister because most people in this country are brain-washed. They would not accept me as their Prime Minister', he said, drily.

'Could you please elaborate, why?'

'Other politicians are fooling people, telling them only what they like to hear. I tell them the truth. I tell people what is in their interest. I tell them what is in Norway's interest. I tell people about their duties and not only about their rights.'

'But why don't you take the help of newspapers and try to convince people that what you say is in their own interest, that they must give you a chance?' I asked.

'Newspapers?' he said, sarcastically.

'Why?'

'We don't have newspapers in this country. We only have propaganda sheets, party propaganda sheets. There is no free press in Norway. We only have a lousy press.'

'This is a very strong statement. I am afraid I can't agree with you', I said. '*Aftenposten, Dagens Næringsliv, Bergens Tidende*—you have some of the best newspapers in the world.'

'My experience is different. How can I agree with you?' he asked.

'Sure, I understand. Still I think you have a very biased opinion against Norwegian newspapers.'

Carl I. Hagen takes exception to the people and the press calling him an 'extreme rightist'. 'I don't understand it', he said. 'If you go farther than right, you get anarchy.'

'The majority of people in Norway call you an extreme rightist', I said.

'I know that. But the party that is closer to neo-Nazism is SV (Socialist Left Party). This is what they want. They want total control. Fascism, Nazism and Communism—it is all same', he said. 'I consider Nazism and Fascism do not belong to the extreme right but to the extreme left.'

'You seem to hate SV or is it perhaps mutual?'

'I don't know. But I don't like to talk much about SV. They have experts on India, Africa and what else without having the faintest idea of their culture, values and traditions. They are concerned about the world and not about Norway. Let Norway finally have a party that thinks about Norway. That is where we come in. More and more people are realising it.'

'You are against Norway playing an important role in world affairs?'

'What I hate is a little Norway trying to play a

policeman's role in the world. I want to cut down Norway's role in foreign matters. Why should we be worried about Nicaragua or India or South Africa? We are politicians to solve Norway's problems and not to waste time talking about problems of far away countries like India and South Africa.'

'But most of your politicians and many Norwegians love to be involved in international matters. Like Gro is so well known all over the world.'

'Oh, Gro. Yes, certainly! Even I admire her. But for a different reason. I like her for moving the entire Labour Party (Arbeiderpartiet) to the right. She is an extremely capable person.'

'Do you really think that she has taken her party that right?'

'Only to the extent she thought her party was ready to go, not beyond.'

The previous night I had met in my hotel room some people from North Norway settled in Oslo. This was to prepare myself for my visit there. Most of them thought that the Government in Oslo was not doing enough to develop their part of the country. 'Norwegian politics is controlled by South Norway. The result is we are treated like a colony by Oslo', said a girl from Finnmark, a province in North Norway. A man from Tromsø said, 'Since all Norwegian resources are controlled by South Norway, they don't give a damn about the poor North.' A middle-aged woman went even further. She said, 'Many Southerners are ashamed of us. They think we Northerners are uncivilised and backward.'

I asked Carl I. Hagen if he agreed with these remarks.

He lost his cool. For the first time I found him gasping for the right words.

'Have you heard the saying, "Those who feed the dog get bitten"?'.

'Yes, I have.'

'We have taken money from Bergen, Trondheim, Stavanger and Oslo and given it to North Norway, and see what you get in return.' He was visibly angry. 'I may have a different opinion on other issues, but to say that Oslo is discriminating against its own people in a certain part of the country is not acceptable.'

He continued: 'North Norway has always been treated very well but look at these people. They bite.'

'How can you afford to make such harsh remarks about North Norwegians? Aren't you afraid of losing your base there? Or do you think it isn't important in your calculation of matters and votes?'

'I speak the truth.'

It was dark outside by now. I had been there for close to three hours. Eli was also waiting for her husband to finish and leave for home. I thanked him for the wonderful conversation and asked him one final question. 'What is your ultimate ambition in life, Mr Hagen?'

'Only this: that when I am old and tired I want to say that I did all that I could for my country. If things go wrong, I want to say I tried my best. If they go right, I would say I also did my share.'

## ***Gro Harlem Brundtland***

All over the world, Gro's name has become synonymous with environment. Her critics at home say she is more popular abroad than at home. They may have a point but the fact remains that Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland has brought more honour to Norway than any other Norwegian in recent memory. No other politician in the world has devoted herself or himself more to the future through environment than her. Almost single-handedly, she has put environment on top of the world's agenda. Even her arch critics at home privately admit that she is simply great. A young fan of hers said, 'We should perhaps

decorate her with the Nobel Peace Prize.' A senior Conservative Party leader, a rival, said, 'She is like an unstoppable locomotive. Her dedication to get things done in whatever field is already a legend.'

She was gracious enough to grant me a rather long interview. The atmosphere was casual. The Prime Minister's office is on the top floor of a modern skyscraper. Her office looked very modest, but functional. We sat in a large meeting room next to her chamber. A senior aide of hers was also present.

I first had an interview with her for the United News of India (UNI), a New Delhi-based wire service. Most of what she then told was immediately topical. Of lasting interest would be what she said on issues related to her first priority: environment.

She said she was very happy with the kind of response she was getting from developing countries like India on her 'Our Common Future' world report on environment and development. She also said she was glad to see India's efforts to cleanse up the polluted Ganges river. 'It is a commendable effort', she said.

'But many had criticised Rajiv Gandhi for taking up this project. They thought it was waste of money', I said.

'It is unfortunate. But it is all due to the lack of awareness. They would come up to support Gandhi if things were scientifically and patiently explained to them. I am sure they will', she said.

Gro was concerned about the way many developing countries are blindly imitating the western model of development.

She said: 'We must get into a situation where developing countries can avoid making the same mistakes that we made. These countries must go for a pattern of economic and social development that is sustainable and that will not be undermined in future. Because then they will have to pay the environment cost twice just as we have had to do in the developed countries—first having the damage

done and then correcting it by more costly procedure and technology.'

'But economic disparity between developing and developed countries still remains the main global problem as far as the Third World is concerned.'

'You mean North-South issues', she said.

'Yes.'

'That is an important message in our report.'

Our meeting had lasted almost an hour and a half. She presented me an autographed copy of her report. I thanked her and left for my next appointment at the Grand Hotel.

A journalist friend was waiting in the lobby. He is a senior journalist who covers the *Storting* for a leading Oslo daily.

'So how was the meeting? Was she in a good mood?' he asked.

'Good, I would say. But one certainly cannot enjoy interviewing a person like her.'

'Why?'

'Because she appears to be talking like a machine. Brilliant, to the point but almost deprived of any emotions. Whether she is talking of poverty in Africa or high technology in Norway, the expressions on her face remain the same.'

'I understand what you mean', he said. 'She has changed a lot of late. She was worse earlier. She has much mellowed now.'

'Sometimes she starts answering your question even before you've finished', I said.

'That is typical of her. But that is because she is very sharp. Many in Norway call her a non-stop working machine. She has tremendous energy; she can work for 20 hours a day without showing any sign of tiredness. She can also talk for hours, if required. She is tremendous', he said.

'You seem to be a fan of hers', I said.

'No way. I disagree with her on most political issues. I often dislike her style of handling issues. But I think she is a great person and I have to appreciate what is good in her.'

Gro is currently facing a bad time in domestic politics. There are forces emerging in her own Labour Party warming up to challenge her leadership. Some have even begun writing her political obituary. Others say she has already acquired a national status which is above party politics.

A senior Labour Party leader I earlier spoke to remarked: 'She has certainly mellowed. She has changed. That fire in her is less and less visible. But it will be a blunder to start writing her political obituary as yet. She still has miles to go.'

I had asked Gro about her greatest ambition in life. She said: 'Only to be able to bring about changes in the world community which are in the interest of future generations. Nothing more.'

Gro was a candidate for the top United Nations job recently. But she lost it to Boutros Boutros-Ghali. She certainly would have made an excellent Secretary-General. There are many in Norway who want her to quit Norway soon for whatever international responsibility.

But the old taxi driver who drove me to Majorstua later that night disagreed: 'Gro is fast emerging like a mother figure in Norway. And you don't let your mother leave your land because she can always serve your home better. We need her first and foremost in this country.' The taxi driver, however, seems to be in a minority. Most observers in Oslo believe that the Gro era is fast ending. 'If for no other reason, people want her to go for a change. She has been around a little too long now', said a leading political commentator.

### *Theo Koritzinsky*

We had agreed that I would try to reach him again. I gave him a call in the morning at his Storting office. 'Oh, so you

are back in Oslo. How was your trip to the west coast?' enquired the mild, welcoming voice of Theo Koritzinsky. 'Great, I would say.' 'I am glad to hear it', he said, asking me if I would like to visit him. We agreed to meet at 4 the same afternoon.

It is always a pleasure to meet Theo. He is well known in the country. But he has no illusions about his popularity. He is aware that he is no longer as popular as he used to be. None the less, he still is rated as one of the most concerned and knowledgeable politicians in Norway, one who takes his responsibility as a member of parliament very, very seriously. Many believe that he served his party as its chairman in the 1980s with great distinction.

'Many people say that you are no longer a top ranking politician in Norway', I asked Theo.

'I am happy to be a serious politician. I think it is important to be able to contribute. It is also a question of your attitude. I don't think I am motivated for general leadership. I think I am not clever enough to be a leader in that sense.'

'Does it mean you have no political ambitions left?'

'That is difficult to say. I am in politics. But I find I am more interested in issues and not in the politics of personalities or leadership. For instance, I hate to give a statement on an issue I don't know properly enough.'

A former associate professor of politics at Oslo University, he wears a lonely, withdrawn look. He certainly has ambitions, like most politicians. But he is not the sort to chase after them or make compromises. Like Carl I. Hagen, Theo also has strong views. Hagen is still climbing up on the political ladder while many consider Theo a star of yesteryears.

A half Jew from his father's side, Theo's family migrated to Norway three generations ago from Poland. 'But that was all so long ago', he said.

'Do you face any problem because of your family's past?'

'Not really. Except that sometimes some crazy loon calls



me up in the dead of night and says things with racist tones. Because they find my family name in the phone and think I am a foreigner, perhaps.'

'Are you suggesting that Norwegians are racist?'

'No, no, no! I don't think Norwegians are racist people. But, you see, 97 per cent of Norwegians ethnically share the same background. So their behaviour towards foreigners can sometimes be very strange.'

'You mean strange but not actually racist?' I asked.

'Well, some of our present laws can be described as discriminatory. For instance, workers from Sweden or the United States can come here to work but not from Africa or India or Pakistan. This is racism and I am against it. My party is against it.'

'This is a kind of political statement', I said.

'But it is true. Some of our official laws look racist. About Norwegians in general, I would again say they can sometimes behave in a strange manner towards people from the Third World but to say that they are racist would be going a bit too far and not correct.'

We discussed many interesting issues during our marathon three-hour conversation in his office—his world view, his views on issues related to Asia and Africa, his party's relationship with the Labour Party etc.; and the allegations that North Norway is treated like a colony by Oslo.

'It is true that North Norway is not as developed as central and southern parts of Norway. But "colony" is too strong a word to use in this context. I would call it politics of geographical discrimination', he said.

'But you do believe that Oslo should be a bit more caring for the feelings of the North Norwegians?'

'Yes, I think we must try to bridge this gap. We must develop our system in such a way that they also get opportunities at par with other Norwegians to develop themselves. Things are better developed in our parts of the country and that often means that people here have more

opportunities than people from the North.'

When we parted, Theo picked up his bicycle parked close to the Storting's back gate and left for home. I left for my hotel ruminating on this aspect of his personality: if a politician of his stature in a developed country like Norway can move around on a bicycle, why must our politicians back home in India always want to be transported in great luxury?



# Andreas Norland

It is hard to think of Norway without *Aftenposten*, Norway's most prestigious daily published from Oslo. Not only is it a great newspaper, it is an important national institution, almost as important as the Storting or the monarchy. Some European journalists rate *Aftenposten* among the top fifteen newspapers in the world.

Often called the First Man of Norwegian Journalism, Andreas Norland has recently taken over as its chief editor. He is easily among the five most powerful persons in Norway today.

He took over the reins of *Aftenposten* after what was described as the biggest media coup in several years or perhaps decades. The outgoing chief editor, Egil Sundar, lost all his powers to Andreas and had later to quit. Andreas is now working overtime to cleanse up and restructure the daily—and also laying out plans to get *Aftenposten* ready for the challenges of the year 2000 and beyond.

Sundar was no ordinary chief. He was an extremely talented editor. For years he ruled over *Aftenposten* like a czar. Many respected him for his guts, style and journalistic flamboyance, while many others feared his clout. He was ruthless against his ideological opponents both within the newspaper and outside. He accepted almost no dissent.

Somewhere down the road, however, Sundar got lost in his own huge shadow. He lost the faith of the majority of his own staff journalists. He was accused of reducing a

great daily to a mere propaganda sheet for the Conservative Party. This was not all true, but *Aftenposten* did suffer a great loss of credibility in the last two years of Sundar. He allegedly ran campaign after campaign to knock down those who did not agree with his view of Conservative politics. Critics say he tried to run the Conservative Party and Norway through *Aftenposten*.

When the result showed up in loss of circulation and advertisement revenue, the management stepped in and Sundar had to quit. Many in Oslo reportedly celebrated his fall with champagne. Indeed an era had come to an end with Sundar's exit from *Aftenposten* and Akersgata—Norway's Fleet Street.

When I called up Andreas' office, I was informed that he had not come in yet. Twenty minutes later he called back. We agreed to meet next day. He said, 'Come tomorrow morning, say, at ten. We'll have coffee and cigar together.'

Andreas's love for cigar is a legend in Norwegian media circles. A few years ago when he had to choose a logo for the editorial column of his ill-fated city daily *Osloavisen*, he settled for the caricature of a cigar.

Andreas is a professional journalist with no interest in active politics, unlike Sundar who was allegedly more interested in politics than journalism. Andreas Norland has written over nine books on various topics, including a political satire and crime novel. He made a once tired looking *Verdens Gang* (VG) what it is today—the sleek lady of Norwegian journalism. VG covers news and events with the speed no other Norwegian daily does.

Andreas told me a few years ago of his ultimate ambition in life: 'I want to establish myself as a creative thinker and get away from the daily burdens of a newspaper.' But born journalist that he is, will he ever be able to quit journalism?

There was still time to visit my colleagues at *Dagens Næringsliv*, Norway's national business daily. I settled for

a quick walk around the downtown National Theatre area and later a coffee and cake at the Grand Hotel's elegant coffee shop. The walk was not exciting, probably because I have got too familiar with that part of Oslo. But the coffee at Grand, rated among the top two hotels in Norway, was good, as always.

Several richly dressed old people were hanging around, leisurely enjoying their coffee. They looked like they had come for a nice time out.

I asked the stewardess serving my part of the restaurant whether some old people's home party was on at the hotel.

'No, no, no party is on!' she exclaimed. 'They're all different people. But why? Don't you like old people?'

'I love old people', I said. 'I come from India and we have tremendous respect for old people in our society. I just asked you out of curiosity, because I have not seen so many old people in any Norwegian restaurant before', I said.

'Old people in Norway get fat pensions and often they have more money than we youngsters. So they are in a better position to have expensive clothes and fun out. But today it is just a coincidence that there are so many of them here at the same time', she explained.

'How do you personally feel when you see old people coming here just for a change perhaps?'

'Sympathetic. Very sympathetic. I feel pity for them', she said.

'But why? They have had their innings. They contributed their share in building the nation. Why pity them?'

'Because most of them are so lonely. I know many of them would like to die today if they could.'

'Do you have grandparents around?'

'Yes, but honestly I hardly get time to visit them. I want to but I have too many things to do. Life is hard in Norway', she said.

The offices of *Dagens Næringsliv* are located at 'Oslo City', the city's trendiest shopping-cum-office complex. The newspaper is rated as a high-quality serious daily, and is among the three best in Norway. During the last few years it has recorded a phenomenal growth. Its journalists possess more drive and zeal than any Norwegian newspaper I know of. It has been my proud privilege to be associated with *Dagens Næringsliv* for quite some time now as their New Delhi-based correspondent for South Asia.

Morten Møst, who heads the foreign desk of the newspaper, is a highly versatile journalist. We met briefly and agreed to meet over lunch at an Indian restaurant. I then dropped in on Arne Holm, the news editor who has played a key role in bringing *Dagens Næringsliv* to its present stature and had coffee with my colleagues Hege Larsen and Birgitte Kjos Fonn. Hege and I had closely worked together during the Persian Gulf War. She was joining the London School of Economics as a student. 'Best of luck, Hege!' I said. I am sure *Dagens Næringsliv* will miss her absence. She has done some most difficult international assignments, displaying remarkable courage.

Morten and I walked down to a nearby Indian restaurant which had been recently opened. There were hardly five or six Norwegians, including Morten. There were a couple of Pakistanis and an Indian Sikh. Morten said he liked Indian food. 'But it's after a while that I'm having this food', he added. He left it to me to order.

We discussed many things, including India, trains and *Aftenposten* under Andreas Norland. I told Morten that I would be meeting Andreas next day. 'He's a great journalist', Morten remarked.

The food was not terribly good. I told Morten that he would have to visit India for a real good Indian meal. 'I see your point. But it isn't that easy to get to India. But I'll see', he said.

It is always a pleasure to discuss issues with Morten. Undoubtedly one of the best brains in the Norwegian

press, he will go places in his career. His ability to grasp even the most complicated foreign issues in no time is phenomenal. I say so out of my personal experience of dealing with him, and not because he likes India. And certainly not because we share the same hobby: travelling by trains.

Morten left for his office while I rushed for the National Theatre tube stop to go to Blindern where I had an appointment with Svanhild Ruud.

Oslo University's International Summer School, ISS, is probably the best known Norwegian institution abroad. Go to any country in the world, from Bhutan to Chile or Zambia, you will find ISS alumni installed in key positions of their country. Its sessions in summer are often described as people's united nations. Svanhild Ruud is the spirit and moving power behind this magnificent institution. Indeed, she has dedicated her life to ISS.

Svanhild is an old friend. She invited me out to a nearby restaurant for a cup of coffee and cakes. 'You haven't changed since we last met', I said to her. 'Thank you, Narendra', she said. 'I believe that's because I enjoy my work. It's so satisfying to be involved in this kind of work.'

She is like the matriarch of a huge global ISS family. The majority of those who come to ISS every year go back only to join her family. I have met several in India who consider themselves part of her ever growing family. I had brought along greetings from five different Indians for her. 'I feel so happy about it', she said. But, you see, I only do my job as sincerely as possible. When they come to ISS from all parts of the world, we care for them, because we know it's the key to bring people from all countries together. When these five Indian alumni remember to send me greetings through you, I know the world is getting better. I know our efforts at ISS are not in vain. I know these greetings are not for me. These are for ISS and its aims.'



'What is new at ISS? Have you started any courses?'

'Well, we are adding things all the time. The latest is our development studies course which is conducted in Africa. So in a way it is a new dimension to our activities', she said.

ISS is State funded. Still Svanhild and her team have to work very hard to raise funds from other sources to keep things going on the right scale. I hope soon other countries would also come forward to support ISS and make it even a bigger and stronger institution, with perhaps branches in other countries.

Taxis in Oslo are well maintained, most of them being Mercedes or Volvo limousines. '*Aftenposten*, Akersgata, please!' I told the young driver.

'You don't need to say Akersgata, sir. Everybody in Oslo knows *Aftenposten* building', he said.

'Really? Is it such a beautiful building?'

'Not really. It looks to me a rather small house. But it's famous.'

'Famous?'

'I mean because it is *Aftenposten*'s home. You know, *Aftenposten* is Oslo's most powerful newspaper.'

'Powerful? How do you mean?'

'All important people in Norway must read this paper. That gives it a very special profile.'

'Do you also read *Aftenposten*?'

'No, no. Do I look an important person to you? *Aftenposten* is a good paper, but it's too heavy for me. But we do get it at home. My mother reads only *Aftenposten*.'

'Don't you like reading newspapers?'

'Oh, I read a lot, of course. But I buy *Verdens Gang* (VG).'

'VG? But why VG?'

'Because it's a serious newspaper with a light approach. It also carries lots of human angle stories. It's a good paper, I can tell you.'

'But some here say that VG is a typical tabloid and that they often sensationalise stories.'

'VG is a common man's newspaper. To me VG looks like my kind of newspaper. That's all that matters to me', he said, conclusively, while halting right in front of *Aftenposten's* headquarters. I paid him and thanked for the conversation which I said I enjoyed.

*Aftenposten* has a fairly tight entrance security system. A tall, old gentleman sat behind the huge reception desk. He immediately handed me over to a person who was waiting to take me to Andreas Norland. 'Do you know Andreas from before?' he asked. 'Yes, I do.' The next minute he gently knocked on Andreas's door and gestured me in.

'Welcome, Narendra! Welcome! It's nice to see you again', Andreas said, heartily.

'How are you, Andreas?' I asked, congratulating him on taking over the editorship.

'Well, I am fine. How are you? How is your family and your son Erik?'

'Fine! I spoke to them only this morning.'

I could see from his desk that he was terribly busy these days. Files and papers lay scattered all over.

I asked him how he found his new job.

'Challenging, I would say', he said with a smile. 'There's so much to do here. At the moment I'm busy restructuring the whole inside setup. I have brought down my own office from the isolated fifth floor to this [ground] floor. Across there is the news room [on the left]. Shift editors also sit there. We have a much better communication among ourselves here. Much healthy atmosphere.' He offered me a cigar.

'I can already see some changes in *Aftenposten* since you took over', I said.

'Changes for good or bad, Narendra?' he laughed.

'Refreshing changes.'

'I'm glad you think so. So you keep a close eye on *Aftenposten* even while sitting in a far away country', he said.

'It isn't difficult. I know places where I can get Norwegian newspapers in India. I myself get *Dagens Næringsliv*.'

'I saw you did some really good stories for *Dagens Næringsliv* during the Gulf crisis', Andreas said.

'Thank you. But my stories were different from what appeared in other papers here because I also covered the Iraqi view. You see, I had access to some people close to Saddam Hussein.'

'I guessed so. That was why I found them so interesting.'

One never gets tired talking with Andreas. I had already been there an hour and a half. We covered a lot of ground. I could see he had some visitors waiting.

He suggested that I go around the house and talk to journalists there if I had the time. 'Sure, but first I have to go for a meeting I have set with one of your senior editors', I said.

'Just let me know when you get free from there. I'll arrange a guide to show you around if you have the time', Andreas offered.

A highly respected *Aftenposten* veteran, the senior editor I met is among the few who will play a key role in Andreas's scheme of things to take the daily to still greater heights.

'But your paper already enjoys an enviable position', I commented.

'True. We're rated among the greatest dailies in the world. But that does not mean we stop striving for greater heights. Anyway, we know our weaknesses also and we know we have a long way to go', he said.

'Do you enjoy working for *Aftenposten*?'

'I love it.'

'Is it because of the prestige of the newspaper?'

'I think it has more to do with the working atmosphere here and the freedom we enjoy. And then *Aftenposten* is *Aftenposten*, the best newspaper of the country.'

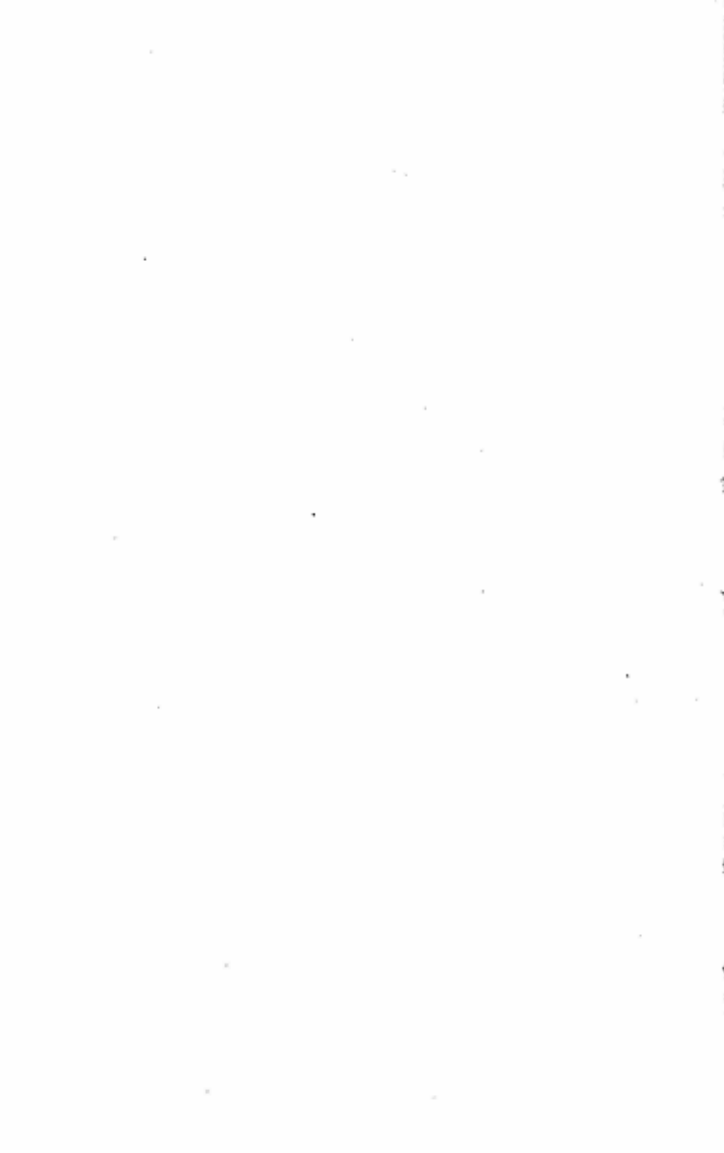
'So you don't work for this paper only because they pay

better salaries?"

'Don't forget that only the best can find a job here. So the salary thing is also related to that.'

'How do you find Andreas as your new boss?'

'Superb. He is a wonderful man to work for. Andreas Norland created history at VG and this is what I can tell you he is going to do here.'



# Kirkenes

Kirkenes is a leading town in the Norwegian Arctic area, a town most Norwegians never care to visit. 'Yes, I had been there once during my (compulsory) military training', eight out of ten Norwegians who had been to Kirkenes will tell you.

A few friends in Oslo had sought to dissuade me from undertaking this trip. 'Going to Kirkenes, what on earth for?' 'Why don't you go to Rome instead? It is a great city and nearer.' Etcetera. But that made me even more curious about Kirkenes. Like many other foreigners perhaps, I was keen to spend a few days in Kirkenes, even though the picture I had in mind of this place was not particularly pretty.

The plane left Oslo on time for Tromsø. Though the weather was rather bad, we took off on time from Tromsø for Kirkenes. Soon we were cruising over what looked like a vast desert of ice.

The landscape around the airport at Kirkenes was all white, though it was not snowing. An icy cold wind was blowing. The whole atmosphere was very depressing. It felt so far away, so much cut off from what a fellow American traveller called 'the civilised world'.

The airport was tiny by any standard, but it has tremendous strategic importance on account of its geographical closeness to Russia. The airport terminal was under heavy repairs, or perhaps remodelling and we were asked to collect our luggage from a make-shift baggage claim area

under a big green tent.

Kirkenes town was 10 or 15 kilometres away. I took a taxi and left for Rica Hotel, probably the only nice hotel in the town. In many ways, it was a strange visit for me. I was there with hardly any knowledge of the place. I did not have any local contact whatsoever. I only had a small tourist brochure to guide me. In my long years of travelling, I now felt terribly lonely and lost.

The room at Rica Hotel was as depressing as the town itself. But it was the best available. I called New Delhi, spoke to my wife Rasham and son Kabir Erik hoping it would help me get over my loneliness. But to no avail. The depression in the atmosphere in Kirkenes was overpowering.

The tall smoking chimney of the local steel mill with its dark, static smoke clouds right in the middle of the town made the surroundings ugly. Why should they have that mill right in the middle of the town, I wondered.

I covered myself in layers of woolen clothes and left to discover if the town had some soothing things to offer.

Most Indians are not used to consulting maps to know our directions in foreign places. I am no different. The hotel receptionist said there were two ways to get to the town centre or Sentrum, as they call it in Norway. She had explained it well, but once out on the road I got confused and decided to follow the one on the left.

I had hardly gone a few metres when I saw a young man, who would be in his twenties, peering idly on to the road from his balcony. The Indian in me was quick. 'Why not ask him? He's a local, he would know', I thought.

'Which way would be the Sentrum, sir? Would you know?' I asked.

'Sentrum?' he laughed. 'Do we have a Sentrum in Kirkenes? It's a very small town. I don't think we have a Sentrum here. But if you go down, say, 500 metres, there

are some shops and banks, etc.'

'You speak good English', I said.

'Oh, I get by. But tell me what you're up to. Maybe I can help you', he said.

'I'm a journalist from India. I'm here only out of curiosity.'

'Then you must come to my house in an hour or so. I'd like to introduce you to a local journalist.'

'I shall be grateful', I said.

'Oh, no. The pleasure will be mine. Please do come.'

'Sure, I will. But may I know your name, please.'

'Aage Thomassen.'

I roamed around the shopping area and town for the next hour or so. It was terribly cold and there was hardly anything exciting to look at. The national day of Norway, 17th May, was only a couple of days away and I saw some youths proudly sporting the red, white and blue national flag on their zooming Japanese motorbikes. Two toddlers in front of a house were learning from their parents how to hold their tiny flag.

Aage Thomassen introduced me to Elin Madsen.

I asked her why she had opted for a career in journalism.

'I could not think of any other profession', she said. 'It's such a fascinating job to be a journalist.'

'Well, same with me. I didn't want to be anything else', I said.

'Isn't it interesting that many journalists have a similar story!'

'How far would the border with Russia be from here?' I asked her.

'Not far. Would you like to go there?'

'I'll try.'

'But we can go there now, right away, if you have the time.'

'That will be great.'



'Let's go then.'

We were on our way, with Aage and Arild Gaska, with whom Elin cohabits, following us in another car. We were at the border within fifteen minutes.

'I come from a place near Bergen and when I first came here at this border I felt frightened. Perhaps because we know nothing about the people and places on the other side', Elin said.

A sign said that photography was strictly prohibited in the area for security reasons. Another sign warned Norwegians against making any contact with people 'across the border'. On both sides, there were two manned watch towers. The pillars marking the Russian side were painted green while the Norwegians had them in red and yellow. I had been to several border posts before, but the feeling one got there was very different, the kind one perhaps gets from visiting a rarely visited place.

Elin told me that the Russians have a hydro power station just behind the border. 'They hired several Norwegians to build it. Sometimes, when they have some problems they can't handle, they still call Norwegian experts.'

Elin took a picture of me with the main border site in the background and promised to mail it to me as a memento from Kirkenes. She kept her promise, and that picture for me is a treasured memento of my visit to the lonesome Kirkenes.

My second day in Kirkenes got off well. With the weather more merciful, I got up early and walked around the town for two hours. It greatly helped me overcome my feelings of loneliness and depression.

Elin works for the *Sør-Varanger Avis*, a small local newspaper which is published three times a week. It is too small a newspaper to make an effective use of Elin's talent, energy and enthusiasm.

'Well, I have plans to move back to Bergen soon', she said, when she came to pick me up for a tea party at her place. Arild and Aage also joined us.

Arild is extremely well informed about Kirkenes and the province of Finnmark. His family has lived there for generations.

'Would you say that Kirkenes is the most important place in Finnmark?' I asked him.

'Certainly. As you know Finnmark is the northernmost Norwegian province and Kirkenes its most important town.'

'So Finnmark has been an important area for a long time?'

'Finnmark was important even during the Viking period.'

'This is interesting. But would you know what exactly the word Viking means?'

'Viking means leaving home for the world.'

'Are you proud of Norway's Viking past?' I asked Arild.

'I'm not sure', he chuckled. Aage said, joining in: 'They were squat, filthy, stinking fellows, a kind of pirates.'

'Are you serious? Do you really mean it, Aage?'

'Haven't you seen the books? It is said so in many books', he replied.

'Yes, I've seen a few books. But I didn't know they were squat and filthy.'

Arild in the meantime fixed up his video to show me a Norwegian Television (NRK) film entitled 'Finnmark Between East and West'. It was a good film based on archival clippings from Germany and Russia telling the story of war in Finnmark between Hitler's occupation forces and Stalin's Red Army. Finnmark was liberated from the Nazis' clutches by the Red Army much before the end of the Second World War.

Kirkenes may be a far away small Norwegian town for

visitors like me, but for students of the history of the Second World War all over the world, Kirkenes is a star attraction. Adolf Hitler had parked 90,000 of his soldiers in this tiny town, obviously on account of its strategic location. But the Russians pushed them out of Finnmark a year before Hitler's death and the end of the war.

'The Russians' toll in the battle was very high', Arild said.

'The Norwegian loss also must have been very high?'

'Finnmark suffered a big loss. The retreating Germans destroyed everything that came their way. Except for two or three buildings, the whole of Kirkenes was razed to the ground', he said.

Many old-timers in Finnmark still feel obliged to the Russians for what they did for them decades ago. The sympathy for Russians and Communism in Kirkenes in the post-war days was so high that a local Communist was elected the first mayor of Kirkenes after the war.

Kirkenes now has a sister city relationship with Nikkel, a neighbouring Russian town. Once or twice a year, Kirkenes and Nikkel exchange sports delegations—evidently in their effort not to forget the foundations they laid in the the dark days of the Second World War.

To set the record straight, however, a footnote on later developments is in order. Recent reports speak of increasing fear among Norwegians about some highly polluting industries in Russia not far from Kirkenes. The awareness about environment having grown among Norwegians, many among those living close to the Russian border in Finnmark are anxious about this matter.

Finnmark may have a rich history, tremendous strategic importance and lure for some foreign tourists, but for the local people it has very little to offer. Jobs are scarce because of the low level of industrialisation and the economy is heavily dependent on the other parts of the country.

There are hardly any jobs for women. Most of the jobs at the Kirkenes steel factory, the only major industry in the area, are meant for men. Built in 1905, the factory was destroyed by Hitler's troops and was rebuilt. The raw material for the factory comes from the iron ore mines in the area. There is also a small wood-based industry. Women who had to have a job to survive were forced by circumstances to leave Kirkenes, Elin said. 'Girls from here go South for higher education and many never return. The result is that we have only 74 women per hundred men here.'

'But, Elin, why do they stay back in the South?'

'Jobs are the major reason. The climate also is much better in the South. Life also is more comfortable there. For example, from there you can easily go to southern Europe on a short holiday. It is cheaper because there are lots of cheap ways to get there. But from Kirkenes—ha! it costs you a fortune. Air fares from here to Oslo or Bergen alone would bore a big hole in your pocket.'

'Still home is home. Or do you believe there are some other reasons as well?'

'You are right, Narendra, the home town is always sweeter', Aage said. 'But believe me, life is much tougher here than anywhere else in Norway.'

'What about daily needs, like bread and vegetables?'

'Vegetables are terribly expensive. Oil also is a little more expensive here than, say, in the South. It gets even more difficult on our budgets because we use oil for heating eleven months a year. I would say that except for the postal rates, everything here is more expensive than elsewhere.'

'But isn't the Government in Oslo aware of all this?'

'The Government is aware and several new schemes are added up every year to make Finnmark more attractive for people from other parts of the country. Also, new schemes have been announced to attract Finnmark students elsewhere back to their home province.'

Elin said that she had heard that both Finland and

Russia have similar schemes to attract the natives of the North back to their own land.

'What would be the population of Finnmark?' I asked Aage.

'Between 75,000 and 80,000.'

'But that is very little even by Norwegians standards, I would say.'

'Yes, it is little. But it is all because life is so difficult here.'

'But I understand the sea off Finnmark is rich in resources like oil. Why doesn't the Government try to exploit these resources? That can really boost up the economy of this area', I asked.

'You're right. There is talk of oil being possibly there in the area. But the sea up here is very deep and the water is too cold. I have heard that they still don't have technology advanced enough to dig out oil from such difficult and deep areas.'

'You don't seem to be optimistic on that front?'

'Not in the near future. But if oil is found, life would finally change for Finnmark.'

We had been talking for hours. I got up and thanked Elin, Aage and Arild for the very interesting time. Elin said she would drop me back to my hotel. We walked down.

'Life must be hell here in winter?' I asked Elin.

'I wouldn't say "hell" but, sure, it is tough.'

'But from whatever I have read I believe it must be enchanting to see those northern lights on a cold wintry night.'

'Oh, you are interested in the northern lights.'

'I've actually read a lot about them.'

'Wonderful. You must come back here in winter. It looks so beautiful. The northern lights can be seen from October to March. But for that you must have a clear sky. These lights look like going up in the sky like ribbons—flowing and glimmering. The colours are blue, green and white. Oh, they look so beautiful. You must see for yourself to

believe it. When the night is cold, say minus 30 degrees Celsius, and the sky is clear, the northern lights are always there to greet us from the sky.'

It was a short pleasant walk to my hotel. I thanked Elin for her generosity, friendship and time. Only 24 hours ago, I had not even heard of Elin. Today when she bade me 'goodbye for now' I felt she was a friend I had known for ages.

I woke up to a wonderful weather. The sky was clear and the sun as generous as it could be—as if to join Norwegians in celebrating their national day.

Kirkenes was no longer the tiny, boring outpost in a deep wilderness that I thought it was. Hundreds and hundreds of people were going up and down the town dressed in their best, beaming and greeting each other. Many wore their traditional dresses. I was told that if I knew better I could actually make out what part of Norway a person belonged to in what looked like a never-ending carnival of people and national colours.

Almost all buses, cars and houses that I saw were emblazoned with the national flag. Little children were in a great mood—many held a candy in their left hand and balloons in the other. Downtown there was a charming parade by children from various schools. They passed through different streets, singing, playing music and waving the flag.

Never before had I seen a nation celebrate its national day with such great verve. In India, the national day for most people is nothing more than a holiday at home. A nation can certainly be built better by establishing such traditions and not only by building a strong economy or armed forces. Norway must certainly be among the most nationalistic nations in the world. It is also perhaps the only country where people love to decorate even their Christmas cake with their national flag.

I wished I could linger around longer. But I had to catch the 13.10 hours flight to Tromsø and soon returned to my hotel to pack up.

Elin drove me to the airport. She looked extremely pretty in her traditional dress from the west coast.

Air travel in North Norway surprises me a lot. It is as free of formality as travelling by bus. When I arrived at the Kirkenes airport to catch my SAS flight to Tromsø, there was no security check and no boarding pass was issued. I was simply directed to leave my baggage in a trolley marked 'SAS Tromsø' and proceed towards the gate. There they collected the coupon from my ticket and just waved me to the aircraft. 'God, they should be careful! Haven't they heard of a thing called hijacking!' I said to a fellow Norwegian passenger. He thought I was joking.

The take-off from Kirkenes was comfortable. Thanks to the national day, there were only eight passengers in the aircraft which could carry over one hundred. The air hostesses were relaxed and chatted with the passengers. I had never before enjoyed such warm and relaxed atmosphere on a flight. It was almost like flying in a private chartered jet. I asked an air hostess if I could go up to the cockpit and speak to the captain.

'I'll just find out', she said.

She returned in a minute to guide me into the cockpit. Captain Odd Borup Jahannessen welcomed me, offered me a vacant seat behind him and also introduced me to his co-pilot.

'Where do you come from, sir?' he asked me.

'India.'

'I understand it's a very big country with some big problems.'

'You're right in a way. Have you ever been to India or any other South Asian country?'

'Not so far. But who knows!'

'Is it a prestigious job to be a pilot in Norway?' I asked him.  
'I suppose it is. I think it is.'

'But it must be difficult to fly around here in winter?'

'That's true. It is difficult in winter but I enjoy it.'

'Do girls in Norway prefer pilots to other men?'

He laughed and pointed to his young co-pilot who was actually flying the aircraft. 'You should ask him. I'm getting old now. But, oh, well, perhaps they do. This job still has a certain glamour.'

'How would you rate SAS as an airline?'

'We're among the three best in the world, perhaps. I don't know but I keep hearing it from colleagues and friends.'

He invited me to stay on in the cockpit during the descent at Tromsø. 'Tromsø airport is on an island. It looks so beautiful from up here', Captain Johannessen said.

He was right. The airport at Tromsø looked like a pearl from the cockpit high above.





# Tromsø

In Norway, a country of hardly 4.5 million, a crowd is a rare sight. But today, Tromsø's Sentrum looked jam packed. Several thousand people of all ages, all dressed in their best. Toddlers in prams sporting balloons. I asked the taxi driver what was going on.

'Oh, they're waiting for the school children's procession, sir.'

'So many people?'

'Yes. You must also see it. It's very funny. People go there for fun . . . to laugh. And besides, the weather is so lovely.'

I checked into the hotel and rushed out to join the crowd. I did not have to wait long. The procession was soon upon us. Norwegians, who only moments ago looked so sombre, suddenly were transformed and laughing. A middle-aged man in front of me, who seemed quite crotchety, laughed the loudest. The students, who had scores and scores of tableaux in the procession, had evidently a keen sense of humour. It gave me a twinge of regret that they, too, would soon learn to look dour and melancholy, like their elders. Most tableaux made fun of politicians, police and businessmen. Though I did not understand much of it, especially the slogans, I enjoyed every minute of it and joined in the infectious laughter. It was a good change after Kirkenes which I began to like only at the end of my stay there.

The capital of North Norway, Tromsø is often described as the 'Paris of the North'. Like most other famous cities of Europe, it also has traditions of its own. Tromsø is not in the same league as Prague, Vienna or even Bergen. It does not have their kind of character. But Tromsø is Tromsø—a small, charming city of the Arctic North, a place which filled my heart with beauty and solace, a place I promised myself to return to as often as possible. It is a place North Norway would look deserted without.

Apart from being a place of great tourist interest—the midnight sun, fjord, reindeer-herding and fishing, Tromsø is also fast emerging as the seat of a number of important institutions. Set up only two decades ago, Tromsø University has already created a niche for itself in Norway. Internationally, however, the university is better known for its location—as the northernmost university in the world.

"Tromsø University meets a long-standing demand North Norwegians had to have a university of their own", a university official said.

"Was it that North Norway wanted to have a university just for the sake of it or were there other reasons as well?" I asked him.

"Oh, there were many reasons. Earlier, our boys and girls had to travel a thousand miles or so to Oslo or Bergen or Trondheim for higher studies. That has changed now."

"But I understand the real reason was to stop the heavy migration of youths from North to South Norway?"

"I would not say that. But that sure was a prime reason."

"Anyway, has the migration stopped?"

"I don't know. But certainly the majority of students from the North prefer to come here."

"What happens after they have finished their university?"

"They go wherever they can find jobs."

"That again means the South?"

"The South also is Norway. What difference does it make?" he asked.

'But you said that the university was intended to stop migration of youths to the South!'

He looked uncomfortable. 'You see, it is a very complicated issue. You should ask these questions to the people concerned in Oslo.'

Lisbet Høltedahl, senior lecturer at the Tromsø University, is a dedicated anthropologist. Middle-aged, intelligent, curious and a specialist on Africa, she has authored a few books, including one on the fishing communities of North Norway.

'Lisbet, are you from Tromsø?' I asked her when I met her in her modest university office.

'Oh, no! I'm from Denmark. My husband comes from here. We met in Paris a long time ago and I have lived here since then.'

'How many years?'

'Twenty-two years plus.'

'But that is a very long time!'

'I know.'

'Have you travelled much in South Norway?'

'Well, Norway is a small country and most people here do get to travel to the South.'

'Are you suggesting that not very many from the South come North?'

'We all know it. Most Southerners prefer to go elsewhere than North', she said.

'But you like North Norway. Don't you?'

'If I didn't, I wouldn't have lived here for so long. But one can't escape the fact that North Norway is the most neglected and unfortunate part of the country. Nordland, Troms and Finnmark are, for all practical purposes, virtually colonies of Norway or even worse. Oslo does not have money for developing North Norway. For those sitting in the comforts of Oslo, North Norway probably does not exist', she said.

'Do you really mean it?'

'Of course, I do. Why not? Most North Norwegians feel the same way. But they would not speak out their mind in front of a foreigner like you.'

'Would you please explain your view that North Norway is a colony?'

'Well, you just have to open your eyes to see it. The fact stares you in the face. Most industries, most financial institutions, most academic centres—anything of worth is based in the South. Everything big, important or great happens there and not here.'

'That could be because better talent is available there', I suggested.

'Talent flows there because opportunities are available there only. First, they [the Southerners] neglect this region and when people are forced to migrate to the South they come up and say, "What can we do? Nobody wants to live in the North". If it is not colonisation, I would like to know what is it. The whole of North Norway is a victim of it.'

'How many people share your view in your circle here, for instance?'

'Majority. Believe me, majority. You talk to the people who matter in the South—the top decision makers and planners etc. Their discrimination against the North is so transparent in their behaviour. They treat North Norway as if it is not a part of the country.'

'Lisbet, Norway is a democracy. Why can't North's representatives in the Storting raise these issues there?'

'You ask them. But I tell you one thing: nobody, and I repeat, nobody, from North Norway will have the chance to become Prime Minister for the next 30 years.'

'Why 30 years? Why not 20 or 50?'

'That is my calculation. You see, the way Northerners are treated by the South is a kind of racism. It is an institutionalised State-run racism against North.'

'Can you please substantiate your views with some examples?'

'There are hundreds of examples, hundreds, I tell you. I'll give you an example of Lapps. Until as late as 1970, there was not a single school in Norway to teach Sami (Lappish) as a language—not a single school.'

'But that could be because there are hardly 50,000 Lapps and they are scattered all over North Norway, Finland and Sweden?'

'Agreed. But to North Norway, you see, it has a different significance, because most North Norwegians have Lappish blood in their veins or, let me say, a big part of North's population.'

'But hardly anyone talks about these ties.'

'Some do. Some accept that they have old blood ties with Lapps, but most North Norwegians deny it. But the majority of the population here have these blood ties—through their grandfather, great grandfather or some other near or distant relative.'

'Why would they want to deny it?'

'Perhaps they feel ashamed. Perhaps! I don't know, really. I know, up in a fjord in Troms, in a fishing community, men call their wives "Finn" when they want to abuse them. "Finn" is one of the ten local synonyms for Lapp.'

Lisbeth appeared to be a keen and concerned scientist of North Norwegian studies, deep in love with her adopted land. She is a thorough professional. During our two-hour talk not once did she raise her voice to stress a point. Neither was she at a loss on any point at any time. I told her that I meant to report our talk in my Norwegian journal which would be published. 'Please send me a copy', she said.

I later asked Jon, executive secretary of the local unit of the United Nations Association, who had accompanied me to Lisbeth, if he agreed with her. Jon is a journalist by training.

'She is right to a very great extent', he said. 'Oslo cares little about developing the North. Take railways. For over a quarter of a century they have been debating whether to bring Troms and Finnmark on the national rail map. I can tell you that debate will never end and we'll never get a rail line here. When it comes to the North, they never have money.'

'But don't your members in the Storting fight for their constituents' rights?'

'Oh, well. They may be MPs (members of parliament) from the North, but they also think the same way as the South. They also are part of the same system, the same mindset.'

'If people think they are not the right representatives, why don't they recall them or stop voting for them?'

'It isn't that easy', Jon said. The whole thing is very very complicated. All political parties here are South-based and they all are very rich both in resources and mass base in the South. They are very organised and powerful. It has been going on for so long that the system has become entrenched. It is too much for the Northerners, who have been exploited for years and years now, to break out of it. Most of them are sort of resigned to it and do not think about it anymore.'

While we were at Jon's office, an aristocratic looking French lady turned up. Posted in Geneva, she handles the marketing of UNICEF cards in Norway. 'We sell a hell of a lot of cards in this country. Norwegians have tremendous sympathy for poor and unfortunate children', she said.

Jon had organised a visit to Tromsø's famous Auroral Observatory at my request. The French lady also wished to join us. 'You seem to be a keen student of the northern lights', she said on the way.

'I only have a general interest in these mysterious lights. I find this phenomenon fascinating to read and talk about', I said.

'I think I should return here in winter to see these lights', she said.

Norway has a long and rich history of scientific research in the northern lights, or Aurora Borealis. It was a Norwegian physicist, Kristian Olaf Bernhard Birkeland, who first created the aurora artificially in his laboratory. The first observatory in Norway to study the phenomenon was built way back in 1912 at Alta in Finnmark. It was totally destroyed in the Second World War. The Tromsø observatory also is an old one, but it has been part of the Tromsø University since 1972. The young scientist who received us at the observatory said, 'We're among the top three such observatories in the world.'

'Do you have regular links with other auroral observatories?' I asked.

'We have collaboration agreements with observatories in Sweden, Finland, Alaska and Russia. I would say we've a very active cooperation with our counterparts in these countries.'

'But what exactly are these northern lights?'

'My English is not very good. I think I should rather give you a brilliant little piece on it by David Landau which I saw in a magazine recently.'

He gave me a photocopy which read:

'The first sign of the northern lights is usually a faint glow in the sky. This soft light increases slowly and may even die away for some minutes. Then, suddenly, a dazzling spectacle fills the sky: waves of light change from one form to another at an incredible speed; rayed bands, arcs and draperies of multi-coloured light split up and move in different directions; long, thin rays shoot upwards; spiral light shapes curl high above.

'The northern lights . . . are produced by electrically charged particles emitted from the Sun. These particles stream in an interplanetary magnetic field,



are captured by the Earth's magnetic field, and precipitated into the upper air of both the Arctic and the Antarctic. On their way down, the particles collide with atoms and molecules of gas and cause the emission of radiation that glows in various colours.'

We were taken around the observatory. But it was all too complicated for a layman to understand. Too many advanced computers, data boxes, diagrams etcetera. Nevertheless, I enjoyed visiting the observatory. I asked a senior researcher there if he knew of any other space object having a phenomenon like the northern or southern lights. He said it was important to have some kind of atmosphere for these lights and offered me the following chart listing key space objects and whether or not they have the northern lights:

Has	Does not have
Earth	Mars
Jupiter	Venus
Saturn	Moon
Uranus (very strong ones)	
Mercury (not very sure yet)	

From the observatory, we drove down to a nearby valley housing the European Incoherent Scatter Radar Facility (EISCAT), an advanced auroral research facility equipped with powerful transmitters, a huge antenna and sensitive receivers. The antenna particularly looked massive.

'It was designed by a young scientist from the Norwegian Institute of Technology, Trondheim', said the facility's deputy director, a Peruvian. 'Scientists interested in the northern lights and plasma physics come here from all over the world', he said, adding, 'like myself'.

He said the EISCAT has the facility to study

atmospheric temperatures at different heights up to 200 kilometres very accurately.

Back in Tromsø, Jon invited us all to a famous sailors' restaurant. Like most maritime cities, Tromsø has its restaurant for sailors. 'But here the difference is that all kinds of people come here, intellectuals, writers, artists. I know that generally people give a wide berth to sailors' restaurants', he said.

I reached Tromsø's airport a full three quarter hours early to catch a flight to Bodø via Evenes. Airports are exciting if they are big and have voluminous air traffic. At Tromsø's airport there were only two DC-9s of SAS. The airport looked small to me, but the duty officer there disagreed. He claimed that it was the most important civil airport in North Norway. 'Charter flights from all over Europe come here bringing tourists eager to see the midnight sun', he informed me. 'We're probably the best airport in the north of the Nordic Arctic Circle.'

'Tourists come here only to see the midnight sun in summer?'

'Oh, yes. They come in thousands. Last year a special flight with two hundred tourists came here from Paris to see the midnight sun. They were here for two days. But it kept raining all the time. They flew back disappointed. That also happens sometimes.'

'Do you face much difficulty in operations?'

'Not really. We're used to it. Moreover, we're all very well equipped. Sometimes when the weather gets too bad, flights do get delayed or postponed.'

Evenes is the hub of connecting flights in the North. It is not, generally, a destination in itself. It looked big, definitely bigger than the Tromsø airport. In fact, Evenes must be the largest airport in the North.

Our SAS DC-9 flight from Evenes landed at Bodø in driving rain. Bodø looked like a modest airport. 'It blows and rains here too much. So much so that the local people get into the habit of walking half bent forward', a co-passenger returning home told me.

'Bodø is among the most important NATO military air bases in Europe. If you stay here for a few days, you'll know it yourself. The sound of supersonic fighter aircraft never lets you live in peace. But you soon get used to it', he said.

The controversial US Air Force's U-2 reconnaissance flight in the 1960s, which had taken off from Pakistan and was brought down over Russia on a personal order of the then Soviet supremo Nikita Khrushchev was also destined for Bodø.

'They're further modernising and expanding Bodø's military base. It's going to cost millions and millions of Kroners', my co-passenger disclosed, bidding me 'goodbye and a happy stay'.

Stig Fossum was at the airport to receive me. He drove me to his comfortable apartment and offered a room there. Young and very energetic, Stig is a superb friend. We have known each other for many years now. We met in New Delhi by accident. He has twice visited us (my family and parents) in India and is now almost a part of our big family.

Stig is among the top names in Bodø's politics. Though he belongs to the Labour Party, or Arbeiderpartiet, he has strong ideas of his own on many issues that differ considerably from that of his party.

'How was Tromsø?' he asked, offering me a hot cup of coffee.

'Good. It was useful. I met some very interesting people.'

I told him about my meeting with Lisbeth and her views that North Norway was virtually a colony of Oslo.

'I don't agree with her. Look, we've got to be pragmatic. It is true that we have rich natural resources up here. But we are one country and it isn't healthy to think in terms of North and South. Our main exports are to Europe and

the fact is that it is cheaper to manufacture and ship things from the South than from the North.'

'So you don't agree with this "colony" theory?'

'I agree that a lot still remains to be done for the North. But to say that it's all deliberate and that the North is treated like a "colony" is nonsense.'

'But, Stig', I said, 'why is the North's industrial base so poor?'

'The Government has no control over private industries. They set up their plants wherever they want. How can a Government force them to go here and not there? Companies go on the basis of their own business sense and judgement.'

He agreed that it was a shame that the Government had still not been able to extend the rail link further up to Kirkenes.

Bodø is the capital of Nordland province. Almost 60 per cent of this town was destroyed by the German bombers during the last world war. But Bodø recovered fast. Today Bodø is a major economic centre and enjoys an enviable reputation among the North Norwegian towns.

Stig owns a motorboat and, seeing good weather, invited me for a trip out in the sea. 'Perhaps you could try fishing there', he said.

'Fishing, and me!'

'Why not?'

'Well, I've never tried before', I said.

'Oh, you can start now! It's easy.'

'Put on these things. It's always a killing cold out there', Stig said, handing me a heavy pullover, some warm clothes and a pair of galoshes.

'How am I going to walk with all this load on?'

'You'll have no problem. Just try', Stig insisted.

He was by now impatient to leave for the harbour. When the sun is shining bright in the sky, a typical North

Norwegian cannot think of anything but the sea.

It was an experience to be at sea for three hours in that small boat. I cannot swim and I was a bit afraid, to begin with, to board the boat. The first time I saw the sea had been when I was 16. We had to go 1,600 kilometres away to Bombay to see the sea water. But Stig was so well in command of the boat that I began to feel comfortable almost immediately after we left the harbour. We had some food and coffee with us. I also tried my hand at fishing but did not have much luck.

'You look more happy out here than on the land!' I teased Stig.

'Oh, I love the sea!'

'At one stage I remember you were planning a boat trip around the world.'

'I'd still like to do that. But, you know, it isn't that easy to work it out.'

Back on the land, Stig took me to Knut Erik Hanssen and Anne Kraglund for coffee and cakes. Anne is from Oslo but moved to Bodø after her marriage to Knut. 'That must have been a difficult decision I believe, Anne?' I asked.

'Why? Bodø isn't a big city like Oslo. But I like this place. I really like this.'

'So you don't think in terms of North and South Norway?'

'No, I see no basic difference. I enjoy it out here though there are bound to be some differences because Oslo is not Bodø and Bodø is not Oslo.'

Knut is an optician with an intellectual bent of mind. He loves to follow international affairs and is very well informed about India. Anne teaches at a local school. They have three children.

'How is it to be a teacher in Norway? Is it regarded as a good profession?' I asked.

'Teachers no longer enjoy the same status as they used to until some years ago because the best brains are no longer opting for a career in teaching', Knut answered.

'I believe it's more or less the same all over the world these days. But I thought Norway's pay structures are good in all fields.'

'Teachers aren't well paid here. That is why the best brains opt for more lucrative careers, like business executives, engineering or medicine', Knut said.

Stig did not agree. 'I wouldn't say that teachers are badly paid in Norway. If better brains are opting for careers in other fields it is due to a variety of other reasons, not necessarily money.'

Bjørn, their little son, kept Anne too busy to let her join our discussion. We returned to Stig's apartment after the chat. Later I went out again for a long walk by the harbour.

In the evening, Aarti and Bholanath Pramanik invited me for an Indian dinner at their home. Bhola is an aeronautical engineer with the Kirkenes-based Norwing Airways which earns most of its revenue flying ambulance services in and around islands and fjords of North Norway.

The Pramaniks come from Nagpur in India and have lived in the North for many years. They moved to Bodø after living in Kirkenes for five years. Bhola seems to have left his heart behind in Kirkenes, however.

'Kirkenes is such a lovely place. People out there are so nice, warm and friendly', he said.

Aarti thought otherwise. 'But I like Bodø more', she said. This town is so special. We've many friends here and people are so warm and nice.'

They proudly showed me a new wing they had added to their house. The Pramaniks, like most other four thousand or so Indians settled in Norway, live a comfortable life.

Bhola later drove me to the railway station. Soon I was on my way back to New Delhi via Trondheim, Oslo and Frankfurt.

The train pulled out of Bodø at 20.35 hours sharp for an overnight journey to Trondheim. It was still too early to

go to bed. I moved to the dining car and ordered a cup of coffee. Minutes later a tall gentleman came over and asked me if he could take the chair opposite.

'Sure, go ahead!'

'Going to Oslo?'

'Well, yes. But I'll get off at Trondheim and fly down to Oslo from there.'

'But you could go straight to Oslo by train.'

'I've to catch a flight from Oslo for Frankfurt at about noon. The train won't be there before 14 hours or so.'

'What country do you come from?'

'India.'

'My name is Erik Torsteinson. Glad to meet you.'

'Are you from Bodø?'

'No. I'm a Norwegian but I'm settled in Barbados in the Caribbean for 25 years now.'

'Barbados?'

'Yes. I own a small shipping company there.'

'How small or big is your company?'

He laughed. 'Very small! I've a 1,500 dwt cargo ship that operates between Miami, USA and Barbados and a ferry ship that shuttles on a certain route in the Caribbean islands.'

'What brought you to Bodø? Business?'

'I'm looking for a second-hand speed boat. I saw one at Bodø, but haven't yet finalised anything. I think I'll come again.'

'Do you have plans to come back to Norway eventually?'

'I don't know. Norway is my country but I love living in Barbados. The weather there is always nice. Even the day temperature never exceeds 28 degrees Celsius. The people are warm. The local transport system is good and it is very well connected with the United States and Europe. Another important reason is that they don't have a stupid tax regime as in Norway. There you just pay a small annual fee to the Government and that is it. But in Norway . . . God!'

'So tax benefits and warm weather don't let you return to Norway.'

'That's right. But I'm also married to a local woman and have children from her.'

'Do they like Norway?'

'Yes, very much. They all have Norwegian passports, like me. Norway is our home. We're not the only Norwegians settled there. Even the biggest Norwegian cruise liner S/S Norway flies the Barbados flag. It's all to escape Norway's tax regime. There are several hundred shipping and finance companies registered there.'

'But why doesn't the Norwegian Government make Norway more attractive for its own shipowners?'

'Well, they've introduced a number of attractive schemes of late. But still there are too many rules and regulations. In this country, people say, the number of laws exceeds the number of inhabitants.'

'In a way, you believe that Norwegian laws are not conducive to the growth of shipping.'

'They have, as I told you, introduced many reforms but still I find that Norwegian laws are very unfavourable to the growth of shipping. Shipping is a very vulnerable kind of industry. For instance, here they have too many laws on how to man ships. In Barbados, it's all very flexible. We hire only the minimum number of people to run the vessels. We run things the way it suits us most.'

'You don't have to pay any tax to the Norwegian Government?' I asked.

'Of course we have to. We're supposed to pay some tax on our profits in Barbados. But do you think all Norwegian shipping companies registered in Barbados tell the truth about their profits?' He chuckled. 'Nobody in Barbados speaks the truth when it comes to money and profits.'

The exit from Oslo's Fornebu airport was trouble free. Nobody bothered even to look at my passport. I was



through all the gates in seconds—immigration, health, customs. The departure lounge was full with international passengers. I bought two packs of Norwegian 'Dajm' chocolates—the best chocolate on earth—from the duty free shop and occupied the lone vacant seat in the hall.

A delay of fifteen minutes in our departure was announced for 'technical reasons'. 'It isn't usual. Anyway, we can't help it', said Sigrid, sitting next to me. She is a journalist with an Oslo daily.

'Where are you headed for?' I asked.

'Brussels via Frankfurt.'

'On some assignment, I presume?'

'Yeah, I'm going to follow the Norway-EC question from that side.'

'Sounds interesting. What do the majority of Norwegians want? Do they want to join the European Community?'

'Very hard to say at this stage. The ruling Arbeiderpartiet is also facing turbulence from within on this issue. A strong movement is building up within this party against joining EC under Inge Staldivik's leadership. Many are also lining up behind the "No to EC" movement with the Centre Party's Anne Enger Lahnstein sitting at its forefront. It is making her one of the most popular leaders in Norway.'

'Would you say that Norway's politics in the next few years would be dominated by the EC question?'

'You bet.'

As we formed up the boarding queue, she asked whether I was a tourist in Norway.

'Sort of. I'm a journalist from India', I said.

'How did you find our country? It would be interesting to know what a man from far away India thinks of Norway.'

'I think you're a very fortunate country', I said. 'But I'm not quite sure if many Norwegians realise it.'

The take-off from Fornebu was smooth. A host of white Arctic birds flew by from a little away, as if to bid me adieu.





Travel Accounts  $\leftrightarrow$  Norway

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